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ALABAMA

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NFL WEEK 1
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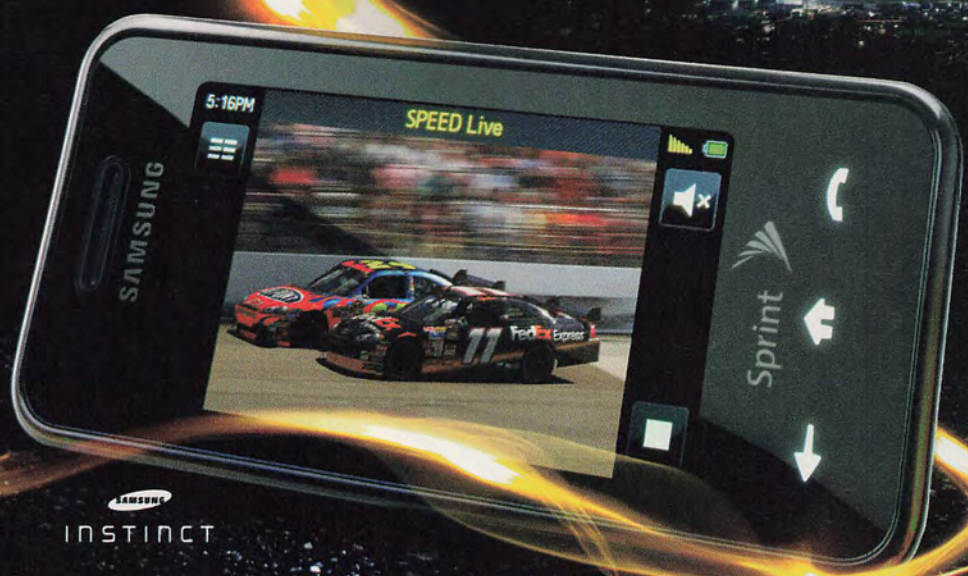

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Sports Illustrated

Lineup

SEPTEMBER 8, 2008
VOLUME 109, NO. 9

28

HAT'S OFF Appalachian State quarterback Armanti Edwards held on to the ball but lost his headgear on the tackle by safety Curtis Taylor in LSU's 41–13 win last Saturday in Baton Rouge. Among the unforeseen events in the opening week of the college season was Hurricane Gustav's bearing down on the Gulf Coast, causing LSU to move up its starting time six hours.

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The Browns just missed the playoffs in '07, then spent eight months working to ensure it didn't happen in '08. An inside look at a team trying to jump from also-ran to contender

BY PETER KING *Page 50*

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BILL FRAKES; MICHAEL J. LEBRECHT II/IDEUCES PHOTOGRAPHY (BROWNS PLAYER)

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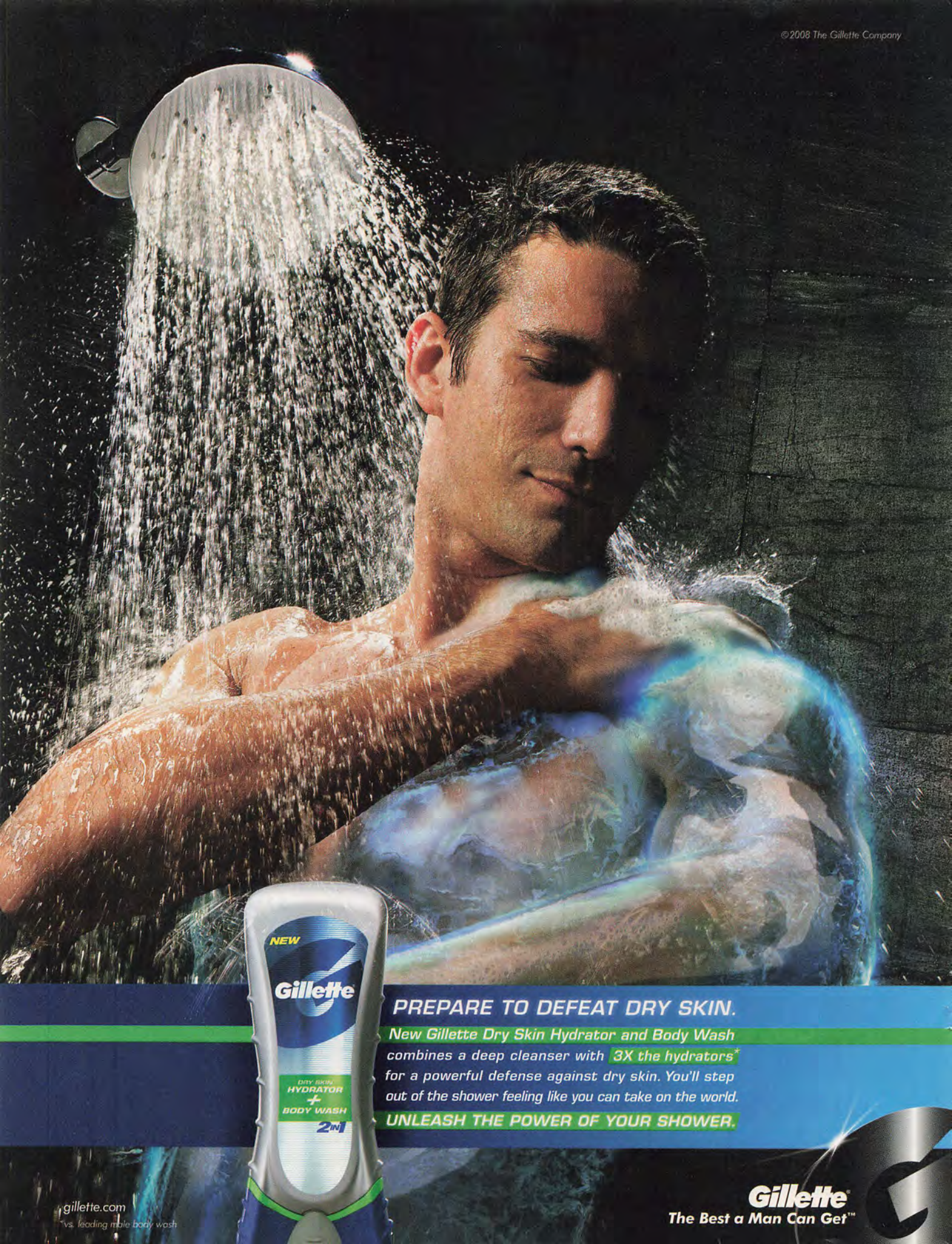

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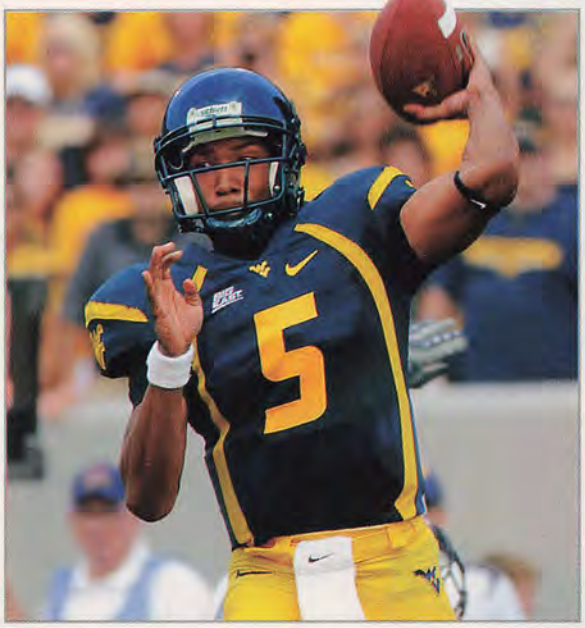

Required Reading

>> Last week SI.com launched The Sweep, a college football blog featuring all-day posts from seven writers through the BCS championship game on Jan. 8. Each Saturday on The Sweep don't miss wall-to-wall coverage from writers at the biggest games and those watching matchups on television. Plus. . . .

- **Heisman Watch** by Gene Menez: West Virginia's Pat White is a front-runner
- **Weekend Pickoff** by Stewart Mandel on Friday

WOUND UP White threw five TD passes last week.

>> BREAKING NEWS, ANALYSIS AND PREDICTIONS AT **SI.COM/COLLEGEFOOTBALL.**

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Inside Baseball
The hottest story in the majors plus a daily baseball blog
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SPORTS AND POLITICS

Fans of the Language

At the Democratic convention last week Governor Bill Richardson called Hillary Clinton's speech "a huge, 500-foot home run." And MSNBC's Keith Olbermann gave Barack Obama ups as a bona fide NFL fan because the nominee referred to the site of his acceptance speech not as Invesco Field but by its former name, Mile High. SI writer Austin Murphy gives his take on the intersection of sports and politics.

>Check out SI.com's photo galleries at **SI.com/photos.**

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SI VAULT
YOUR LINK TO SPORTS HISTORY

FROM SPORTS ILLUSTRATED SEPTEMBER 14, 1998

When Mark McGwire tied Roger Maris's record of 61 homers in a season, SI writer Tom Verducci captured the moment.

AT 1:21 P.M., McGwire stepped into the batter's box and one minute later propelled a pitch from 38-year-old righthander Mike Morgan into the history books. The ball flew dangerously close to the leftfield foul pole, but McGwire threw his arms up in celebration even before the ball banged off the club-level facade. The man knows his homers, having hit 448 of them. The 37-year chasing of Maris was over. Some Cubs congratulated McGwire as he ran around the bases. Sosa clapped his glove in rightfield. McGwire touched home plate and pointed to his father in the stands behind the backstop. "Happy birthday, Dad!" he yelled. "Last year I gave him a card," Mark said with a laugh after the game. "Now you tell me, is all that fate, or what? The man upstairs has a plan for me, I guess."

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JEFF GENTNER/AP (WHITE); AP (OBAMA); HOWARD SCHATZ (WERTHEIM); MEL LEVINE (KING); V.J. LOVERO (MCGWIRE)

LeadingOff

Scary Good

With intensity written all over his face, Great Britain's Andy Murray prepared to pound a serve at Austria's Jürgen Melzer in their third-round match last Saturday at the U.S. Open (page 68). The sixth-seeded Murray needed three hours and 52 minutes to beat back the challenger 6–7, 4–6, 7–6, 6–1, 6–4 in Flushing Meadows, N.Y.

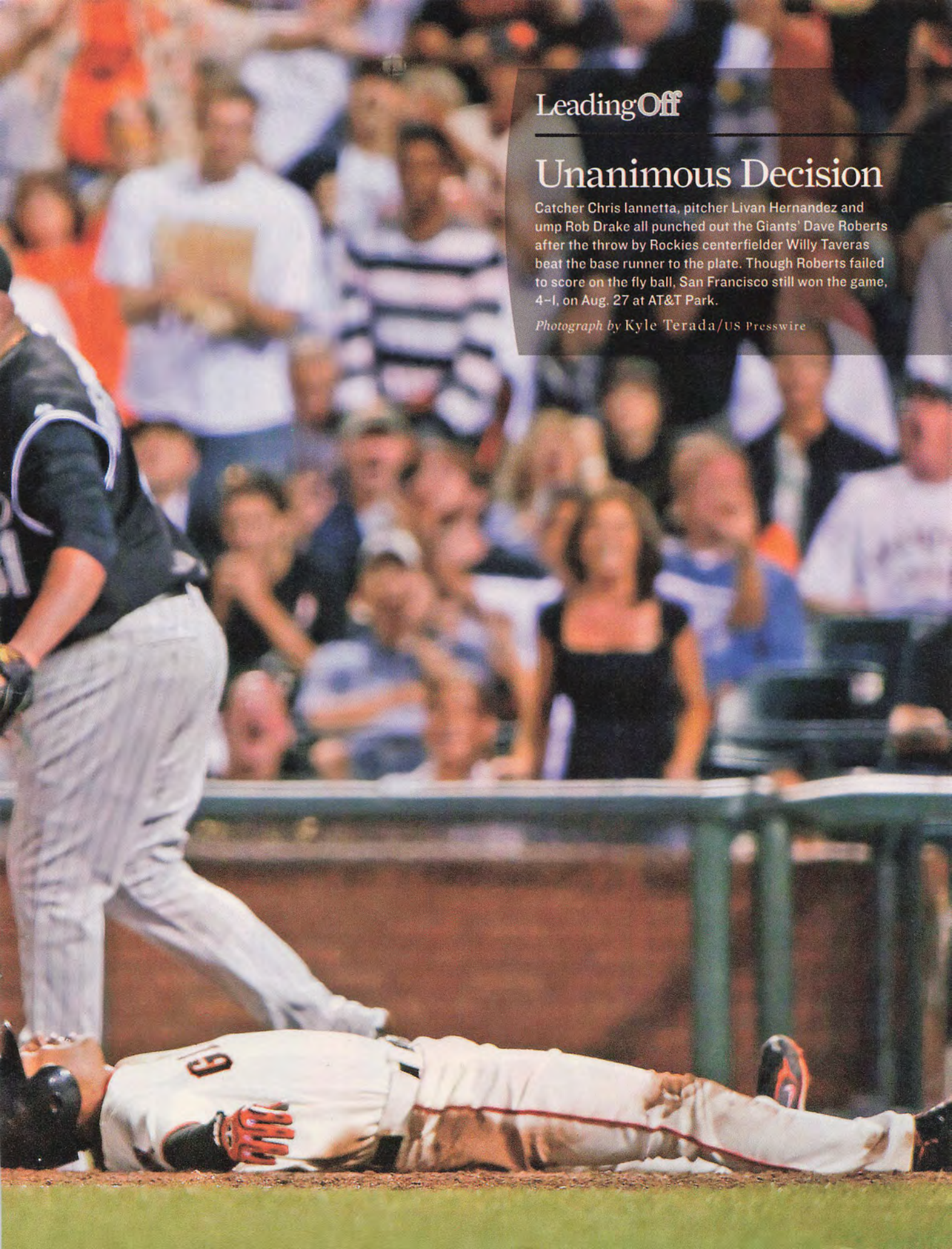
Photograph by Andrew Gombert/EPA

MIZUNO

Unanimous Decision

Catcher Chris Iannetta, pitcher Livan Hernandez and ump Rob Drake all punched out the Giants' Dave Roberts after the throw by Rockies centerfielder Willy Taveras beat the base runner to the plate. Though Roberts failed to score on the fly ball, San Francisco still won the game, 4–1, on Aug. 27 at AT&T Park.

Photograph by Kyle Terada/US Presswire



By a Thread

Thanks to his jersey's tearaway fabric, Hawaii's Ryan Mouton escaped the grasp of Florida's Jeff Demps and picked up extra yardage on a kickoff return last Saturday in Gainesville. In the end, it was the Gators who ripped apart the Warriors 56–10 in the opening week of the college season (page 28).

Photograph by Jimmy DeFlippo

Hex-a-Gone

The next time someone brings up the SPORTS ILLUSTRATED cover jinx, you should show them the Olympic Preview and then your Aug. 18 issue, both of which feature swimmer Michael Phelps. Two covers, eight gold medals and all those world records. That is a jinx that I would love to be a part of.

Randy Knecht, Buffalo City, Wis.

For reprints of SI covers, visit **SIcovers.com**.

Eight gold medals for Michael Phelps but "only" seven world records. I guess the jinx lives.

John Deushane, Alpharetta, Ga.

I very much admire Phelps's Olympic achievements (*Gold Mind*, Aug. 18), but more credit should be going to Jason Lezak for swimming the anchor leg in the monumental come-from-behind victory for the U.S. 4×100 free relay team. Although Beijing will be remembered as Phelps's Olympics, the key moment in this Olympiad was Lezak's Lunge.

Bob Stomber, Basking Ridge, N.J.

Wow! Until I got my latest SI, I had absolutely no idea there were athletes in Beijing competing in sports other than beach volleyball, swimming or gymnastics. Come on, NBC. What about the other athletes who have devoted their lives to becoming the best in the world? I know nothing about fencing, but man, wouldn't it have been cool to see Mariel Zagunis, Sada Jacobson and Becca Ward sweep in sabre for the U.S. (*Sabre Sisters*, Aug. 18)? Thanks, SI, from those of us who want to know something more than whether Michael Phelps won his heat or that the beach volleyball girls went to see the Great Wall of China.

Joe Vierhile, Indianapolis

I have to laugh at the people who are criticizing certain less-mainstream Olympic competitions for not being "true sports." Most likely these critics are the kind of "sports fans" who haven't left the couch in years.

Christina Farrall, Gypsum, Colo.

I agree with Selena Roberts that we should not ramp up our spending on Olympic training (POINT AFTER, Aug. 18), even if our program becomes second to China's. More spending on the

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Olympics means less spending elsewhere. I take pride in our athletic accomplishments, but I would be even prouder if no one in this country wanted for health care or a decent education.

Paul Agathen, Washington, Mo.

G-Rated Seats

Dan Patrick questions the viability of the NFL's new fan rules of conduct (JUST MY TYPE, Aug. 18) and suggests that the NFL institute family-friendly sections. As the founder of the Redskins' Hogettes and a member of the Professional Football Ultimate Fan Association, I ask, Dan, who are you kidding? Few families of four can afford NFL tickets, parking, food and drink costs. And then if they do make it to the game, they are confronted with foul language? PFUFA endorses the new NFL fan policy. The whole stadium should be "family friendly."

Michael Mayne Torbert, Fairfax, Va.

Moody's Many Moods

Regarding Jack Nicklaus's comment about the late Orville Moody being a terrific guy with a dry sense of humor (PLAYERS, Aug. 18), let me quote directly from SI's profile of the golfer in 1970: "Tell you one thing," Moody says. "Kent State and the rest. I'm gettin' sick of it. Next time they try somethin', might save more lives in the long run if we get out the machine guns and shoot 'bout 50 of them fools. That'll stop 'em hollerin'. I wish the President would make an amendment to the Constitution to say, All right, you can demonstrate, but we're gonna shoot you if you do. That'd stop them pussyfooters." Yeah, Jack, that Orville, what a card!

Jeff Kisseloff, New Paltz, N.Y.

Brett's Jet Worth

As a lifelong Green Bay Packers fan I thoroughly enjoyed having Brett Favre as our quarterback all those years and delighted in his frequent heroics and his passion for the game. At the same time I'm sure I had company when I moaned in frustration as he threw yet another interception at a critical point in a playoff game. As the drama played out over these past few weeks, it seemed almost no one in the national media had the courage to say that, despite last year's regular-season stats, Favre's best seasons were far behind him. I'm glad Paul Zimmerman (*Brett Propelled*, Aug. 18) finally pointed out the emperor's lack of clothes in recent years.

Dennis Durham, Santa Rosa, Calif.

In my 27 years as a Jets season-ticket holder, I've had almost nothing to get excited about. I was finally a little excited when they got Favre. Then I read Dr. Z's article. If he's right, my season should be over, as usual, before Halloween.

Jay Lombardo, Cliffside Park, N.J.

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LIFE ON AND OFF THE FIELD

Players

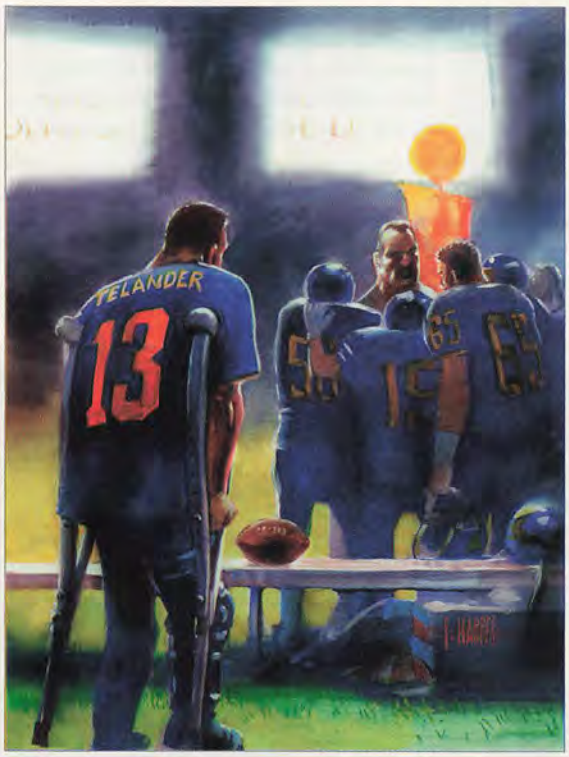
Friday Night Plight

High school football giveth, and taketh away, sometimes all too suddenly **By Rick Telander**

WE OFTEN play catch with a football in our yard, Zack and I. Well, the yard is too small, so we play on our driveway, and a bad throw means the ball will hit the blacktop and be gouged. But recently this old high school quarterback hasn't been able to sling a ball the kid couldn't catch or at least stop. At 17 he's a wiry 6'4", with a 6'7" wingspan, hands like pie tins. And he can sky. In junior high he finished fifth in Illinois in the high jump. He's fast, too—had the fastest 300-yard shuttle time on the football team this summer—and agile. He started on the sophomore basketball team, still owns club swimming records, was a terrific diver and has thrown a baseball 260 feet. Last spring he made all-conference in lacrosse.

But football is something he loves with a passion, and, after playing cornerback, safety and quarterback, this was going to be his bust-out senior season as a varsity wide receiver, the position he was meant to play. I called him "White Randy Moss" when I threw to him. "Dad, I can't wait to score a touchdown," he'd say. "I can't wait."

All winter he lifted weights, and all summer he worked with the team, honing routes, catching pass after pass from strong-armed junior quarterback Tommy Rees, snaring balls that were nearly silent as they nestled in his hands. The season opener was approaching, and the excitement was building in Lake Forest. Never before had our high school team played at home under lights. But after more than a year of fund-raising by the sports moms and the booster group, the lights had been installed and the switch would be thrown on Friday at 7 p.m.



As his jubilant pals left the field, **MY SON ZACK WAS ALONE,** moving awkwardly on crutches.

Then on Monday, while running sprints at practice, Zack went down. The kids running next to him thought he'd had a heart attack. It was his right knee. The MRI was inconclusive, but the leg was locked in a slight bend as if it were welded that way. I had ridden my bike over to practice earlier that day, sitting far up in the empty stands, out of sight, as I like to do. I had left when the sprints started. Boring stuff, and I had a long way to ride. But when I got home, Zack was already there, on crutches, a haunted look in his eyes.

The surgery came on Thursday, and Ed Hamming, the orthopedic surgeon and a family friend, said it went well. Zack's torn and buckled meniscus was sewn back together, a small part was removed, and now, in a straight-leg brace, he would begin to heal. How long? A couple months or so. The football season would be over.

Just that morning, Aug. 28, a full-page article had appeared in the suburban paper with a photo of Zack catching a ball in practice under the headline: TELANDER WILL BE TOP TARGET IN LF'S PASSING GAME. The writer had mentioned that I used to play ball, and had asked Zack if his dad had given him any advice. Zack answered, "He said there is nothing better than high school football or high school sports, and that one should never take any moment on the field for granted."

On Friday morning Zack and I went to a pancake restaurant. Zack sat in the backseat of the car, barely fitting from door to door. "Dad," he said, "is my knee going to be O.K.?"

I assured him it was. What dad wouldn't? He had taken a shower—that was an effort—

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and the Steri-Strips on his knee had fallen off the three single-sutured holes, revealing the inked word YES on his kneecap, written by a nurse so the doctor would know which leg to cut.

After a time he said, "I think I had a life experience a couple years ago when I saw this movie called *Outside Providence*. Have you seen it? It's kind of a kid's movie."

I told him I hadn't.

"The narrator is this guy who says, 'My younger brother Jackie had an accident when he was a kid. We were playing touch football, and he fell off the roof.'" Zack laughed at that, and so did I. "But the brother doesn't cut Jackie any slack. No pity. He's in a wheelchair, but his brother's always yelling at him, 'Come on Jackie, hurry up! We're gonna be late!' Feeling sorry for somebody only makes them feel worse."

"You're right, bud. That is so true."

There are many tragic things in life. What is a missed season? A wounded limb? A chance lost? I told myself those things were inconsequential. That even if they weren't, they were blind bad luck, nothing you could do, move on. A large, hand-lettered sign had appeared on our front doorstep the night before. It read, GOOD LUCK ZACK! GO SCOUTS! BEAT THOSE PIRATES. It was signed, THE VARSITY CHEERLEADERS. They didn't know.

At the game I watched my son stand on the sideline as his teammates rallied to a 30–15 victory over Palatine. He wore his jersey, number 13—was that the cause?—and he tried to stay up with his pals. But when they jubilantly left the field, he was alone, moving awkwardly on his metal crutches.

I thought back to my senior season. Wasn't it yesterday? Under my hometown lights in downstate Peoria, we Richwoods Knights rained down hellfire on those who dared enter our house. There were the seven noble stitches in my chin, the cheerleaders in forest green and white, the white-booted Royalettes, my wise-guy buddies in the stands, the kids in the band, the tubas, the flutes, the swishing pom-poms, parents up high where adults should be, neighbors there too, even dumb-ass teachers. And then there was the football arcing through the velvet sky, under those Friday night lights, a bright, flickering orb of danger and unimaginable joy.

I stand away from the large exiting crowd now, in my blue TURN ON THE LIGHTS T-shirt and think of my son. And for a moment it's almost more than I can bear. □

ILLUSTRATION BY FRED HARPER; CHRISTOPHER SZAGOLA/CAL SPORT MEDIA (MCLOUTH); JOHN ALBRIGHT/ICON SMI (SHERMAN); RHONA WISE/ICON SMI (TREANOR); RICHARD HEATHCOTE/GETTY IMAGES (VIDIC); JEFF GENTNER/AP (STEWART); DAVID E. KLUTHO (WERTH); BOB MARTIN (NADAL, FEDERER)

WHO'S Hot

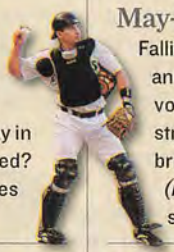
Jayson Werth

Bumped up from platoonist to everyday player, the Phillies outfielder had hit .500 over seven games through Sunday—including three homers at Wrigley Field, with his folks on hand. Oh, yes, the Phils had won seven of 10. Said Werth, an Illinois native, "It's a good spot, a good club, and it's good to be loved."

Bill Stewart »

Rich who? Stewart, Rich Rodriguez's successor at West Virginia, said he wanted the team to pass more, and did it ever! QB Pat White had 25 completions and a career-high five TDs to beat Villanova. White, for one, loves it. "With this new staff," he told Charleston's *Gazette*, "anything is possible."

Hamed Haddadi



Hey, Grizzlies fans, who's your Haddadi? Answer: the 7′ 2″, 254-pound center from Iran (yes, Iran) whom Memphis signed after his play in Beijing. Who wouldn't have noticed? He led all Olympians, with averages of 11.2 rebounds and 2.1 blocks.

John Carney

Still kicking. On cutdown day the 44-year-old placekicker got picked up—and by the Super Bowl champion Giants no less. Declared Carney, who played 13 games with Jacksonville and Kansas City last season, "I feel strong and healthy."

WHO'S Not

Pittsburgh

A long way from Philadelphia. Squandering a 14–0 lead to Bowling Green was no fun for the NCAA's Panthers *(page 35)*, and baseball's Pirates are setting standards of lowliness. Ten straight losses closed out a 7–21 August for the Bucs. Even All-Star outfielder Nate McLouth *(above)* was scraping bottom—going just 2 for 19 over five games.

Mike Sherman

Ah, for the calm of Green Bay. In his coaching debut at Texas A&M the former Packers head man got embarrassed at home by Arkansas State, drawing, of course, the ire of the blogosphere. After the Aggies' four-turnover meltdown Sherman said, "I'm not discouraged. But I am disappointed."

May-Treanors

Fallible! Who knew? Misty May-Treanor and Kerri Walsh actually lost a beach volleyball match (they'd won 112 straight), though Misty's outlook may be brighter than husband Matt Treanor's *(left)*. The catcher, a backup for the scuffling Marlins, is hitting .232.

Manchester

Getting dissed by an Arsenal footballer is one thing—but this? Man U fullback Nemanja Vidic *(left)* reportedly went off on the city (he later backtracked), saying its "main attraction is considered to be the timetable at the railway station, where trains leave for other, less rainy cities."

SI PLAYERS TENNIS POLL

Whom would you rather watch play?

<< Roger Federer, world No. 2 . . . 75%
Rafael Nadal, world No. 1 . . . . . 25% >>

FAST FACTS The survey was completed during the first week of the U.S. Open. . . . Federer, 27, and Nadal, 22, are the only men in tennis's Open era to meet in six Grand Slam finals. Nadal is 4–2 in those matches; overall he is 12–6 versus Federer. . . . After watching Federer win the 2007 Australian Open, tennis great Rod Laver said, "It's hardly fair that one person can do all this. . . . The way he moves around the court, you feel like he's barely touching the ground."

[Based on a survey of 71 ATP and WTA players] • For more on the poll, and to comment on it, go to SI.com/players.

For the Record

Died At age 81, **Phil Hill (above)**, the only American-born driver to win the Formula One championship. Hill, who grew up in California, won his title under sad circumstances. In 1961 he was involved in a tight points race with Ferrari teammate Wolfgang von Trips. In the penultimate race of the season, the Italian Grand Prix, Von Trips died in an accident that also killed 15 spectators. Hill won the race and clinched the championship. An introspective man in a sport dominated by playboys—he spent much of his spare time in Europe in opera houses—Hill quit driving for a time in the 1950s because of anxiety and ulcers. But in a 1961 piece he wrote for SI, he described how the thrill of climbing into a car drew him back: "All doubts, all anxieties, all memories of past painful struggles fade away before the magic of this occasional purity, and I am at one with the car."

Died At age 44, former NBA center Kevin Duckworth. The 7-footer was a two-time All-Star for the Blazers in his 11-year career. One of the most popular players in Portland history—he made his off-season home in the city—Duckworth died in Gleneden Beach, Ore., while on a goodwill tour for the team; an autopsy revealed an enlarged heart. "People talk about Clyde Drexler being the best player on the team, but I say it was Kevin Duckworth," said former teammate Buck Williams. "He was the X factor . . . the glue that [held] the team together."

Died At age 81, after suffering a heart attack, **Walter Kowalski (right)**, who shot to fame in the 1950s as pro wrestler Killer Kowalski. One night in Montreal in 1954, Kowalski accidentally tore off part of the ear of opponent Yukon Eric. When he visited Eric in the hospital, the two laughed at how silly his bandages looked. The next day the papers reported that Kowalski had gone to the hospital and laughed at his victim, cementing his status as one of the leading heels of the day. The 6' 7", 275-pound Kowalski—in reality, a gentleman and a longtime vegetarian—retired in '77 and ran a wrestling school in Massachusetts, where he trained stars such as Triple H and Chyna.

Moved To Indianapolis, as Hurricane Gustav headed for Louisiana, the Saints. The team relocated to the Colts' new Lucas Oil Stadium as it prepared for Sunday's home game against Tampa Bay. The Saints plan to play the game at the Superdome as scheduled unless damage from the storm makes it impossible.

Amputated By doctors, the lower part of the right leg of Wayman Tisdale. The former NBA star learned last year that he had a cancerous cyst in the leg; the surgery was performed last week to keep the cancer from spreading. Tisdale, 44, is an award-winning jazz bass guitarist, and his latest album, *Rebound*, was inspired by his fight against the disease. Tisdale said he plans on touring as scheduled later this year.

Ruled By the LPGA, that its players must be conversant in English. Nineteen events this season have been won by international players, including two who speak virtually no English. "We are a U.S.-based tour, and English is the language used by the vast majority of our sponsors and fans and media," said deputy commissioner Libba Galloway. "It is vital that our players can communicate with these core audiences." Beginning next year players who can't speak English face suspension until their proficiency improves. No other sport has such a rule. The Asian American Justice Center deemed the policy "an affront to our American principles of diversity and equality."

Changed By Chad Johnson, his last name. The Bengals receiver will now legally be known as Chad Ocho Cinco, in honor of his jersey number. (*Ocho cinco* is Spanish for 8-5.) "Have I ever had a reason for why I do what I do?" Ocho Cinco told the Bengals' website. "I'm having fun."

They Said It

LOU PINIELLA
Cubs manager, on why he wishes baseball's instant replay process were like the NFL's:

"I'd love to be able to throw a red hankie or a green hankie. Imagine being able to throw something on the field and not be ejected."

SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

A man was ejected from Yankee Stadium for attempting to leave his seat area to use the restroom during the playing of *God Bless America.*

AP (HILL CAR); JOHN G. ZIMMERMAN (HILL); CHRIS BERNACCHI (PINIELLA); CHARLES HOFF/DAILY NEWS (KOWALSKI)

Beijing Cha-Ching

Olympic heroes medal in marketing

MICHAEL PHELPS'S Stateside itinerary is almost as frantic as his Olympic swimming schedule. He shot a cameo for *Entourage* (*right*, with Kevin Connolly) last Thursday, and he was set to join 150 other Olympians (including Kobe Bryant and Lisa Leslie) on Wednesday in Chicago for *Oprah*. Then it's off to New York City to serve as a presenter at the MTV Video Music Awards on Sunday, followed by a gig as host of the Sept. 13 season premiere of *Saturday Night Live*. He'll need to find time to write. He signed a book deal with Simon and Schuster worth a reported $1.6 million. Titled *Built to Succeed*, the book is due out by Christmas. Phelps might face some literary competition from his mom: Publishers are said to be showing an interest in Debbie Phelps as well.

Here is how some other stars of the Games have fared.

Nastia Liukin While Phelps will push Frosted Flakes, the women's gymnastics all-around champ will appear on Wheaties boxes this month (as will decathlon champ Bryan Clay). Liukin is also reportedly in line to hit the big screen—or at least hit the direct-to-DVD bin—in the comedy *Chalk It Up*. Even if no one sees the movie (it stars Mario Cantone), Liukin will still get plenty of visibility: She's on a Times Square billboard for Vanilla Sky Jeans.

Misty May-Treanor In addition to shopping a book, the two-time beach volleyball gold medalist has signed on as a contestant on ABC's *Dancing with the Stars*.

Dara Torres The 41-year-old signed a $3 million, two-book deal—one a memoir, the other a health and fitness guide

Mike Krzyzewski Coach K's next book will tell the story of how the scrappy Redeem Team won gold.

Usain Bolt The world's fastest man hasn't even been back home to Jamaica yet. "Track and field is my job," he said last week from Zurich, where he won the 100 meters—and $16,000—at the Golden League meet.

Shawn Johnson The 16-year-old gymnast can't vote in a presidential election until 2012, but Johnson (*right*, with Al Gore) gave Barack Obama her endorsement anyway when she led the Democratic National Convention in the Pledge of Allegiance last Thursday.

Kirsty Coventry The former Auburn swimmer, who won all four of Zimbabwe's medals in Beijing, was given a briefcase filled with $100,000 by president Robert Mugabe on live television. Her prize was in U.S. dollars, which is a good thing: Inflation in Zimbabwe is running at 11,000%, rendering local currency all but useless. —*Rebecca Shore*

HEATH FAMILY/AP (PALIN BASKETBALL); PVT. CHRISTOPHER T. GRAMMER/DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE/AP (PALIN GUN); JASON KEMPIN/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES (MILLER); CHARLES DHARAPAK/AP (JOHNSON); WHEATIES/BUSINESS WIRE (WHEATIES); CLAUDETTE BARIUS/HBO/AP (PHELPS)

Going Veep

IF NOTHING else, John McCain's selection of Alaska governor Sarah Palin as his running mate means that he has someone who could match up with Barack Obama if the presidential tickets ever play two-on-two hoops. When she was a student at Wasilla (Alaska) High, point guard Palin (class of '82) picked up the nickname Sarah Barracuda for her fierce play on the court. Her career highlight: a Willis Reed–like performance in a state playoff game, when she hit a game-winning free throw despite having a stress fracture in her ankle.

Palin's jockish ways continued after high school. She worked for a time as a sports anchor for a local TV station, and she fishes and hunts. (Her husband, Todd, is a four-time winner of the 1,971-mile Tesoro Iron Dog Championship, the world's longest snowmobile race.) Not that her Democratic counterpart is a slouch in the sports department: According to the University of Delaware website, Joe Biden, 65, "is a vocal fan of the Fightin' Blue Hens football team, for which he played briefly as what he calls a 'half-baked halfback.' "

The Beat

RED WINGS defenseman **Chris Chelios**, 46, summers in Malibu Beach, Calif., enduring punishing workouts and the needling of his pals in the self-dubbed Malibu Mob, a group of celebrities and athletes that includes **John Cusack**, **Tony Danza**, **Laird Hamilton** and **John McEnroe**. "He's the oldest man in the world," Cusack, 42, says of the NHL's elder statesman. "He's actually 792." Chelly brought the Mob to Detroit last week to meet the Stanley Cup and play in a golf tournament. . . . SI Swimsuit cover model **Marisa Miller (right)** got the cold shoulder last week—on camera at least. She filmed a 30-second spot for the NFL in which she sits next to a football-crazed schlub who's too absorbed in NFL.com to notice her. "My life has changed since I was on the cover," Miller says. "I'm hoping to get more into sports. I'd love to be a sportscaster." . . . It was no surprise to see pitcher **Brad Penny** canoodling with actress **Eliza Dushku** *(Bring It On)* at a Dodgers bowling event last week—they're a couple. But outfielder **Matt Kemp** hobnobbing with **Larry King**? "He comes to the games, and we've become friends," says Kemp. "L.A. is a different world. You never know what'll happen." —*Arash Markazi*

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THIS MONDAY,

WHEN YOU'RE RUSHING TO CATCH THE ELEVATOR IN THE MORNING AND YOU SEE THAT ONE GUY INSIDE AND HE CLEARLY SEES YOU BUT DOES NOTHING ABOUT THE CLOSING DOOR ASIDE FROM STEPPING TO THE SIDE SO HE'S SLIGHTLY BUT NOT TOTALLY HIDDEN FROM YOUR VIEW, TRY TO CLEAR YOUR MIND. FOCUS ON THE FACT THAT THE GREATEST NIGHT IN FOOTBALL IS WAITING JUST FOR YOU.

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VIKINGS vs PACKERS 7:00 PM/ET | BRONCOS vs RAIDERS 10:15 PM/ET

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Chute Happens

A brief history of the aerial entrance

IT WASN'T a good week for parachutists. Last Friday, the Cincinnati Bearcats' mascot got tangled in a wire as he alighted with the game ball for the school's opener against Eastern Kentucky. The next night two parachutists landed at Duke's Wallace Wade Stadium an hour before the Blue Devils' game against James Madison. Alas, they were supposed to be at the North Carolina–McNeese State game in Chapel Hill—eight miles away. They're just the latest evidence that maybe men (and mascots) aren't meant to fly.

PARTY CRASHER Miller was charged with a misdemeanor: dangerous flying.

April 1978 The first ball at a Triple A game in Tucson is delivered by a skydiver. A nude skydiver. The prank was ordered by a Toros coach, and the authorities are not amused. "She tried to throw out the first pitch, but she couldn't get it through the screen in the paddy wagon," says Rich Donnelly, who was then Tucson's manager. "I think she was a dancer at the Cha Cha Club."

April 1983 As the mayor of Baltimore looks skyward, the Orioles mascot misses Memorial Stadium on Opening Day and lands in the parking lot. The following year President Reagan is on hand to watch the birdie give it another go—and nearly impale himself on the foul pole.

November 1993 Attention-seeker James Miller drops in on the Evander Holyfield–Riddick Bowe heavyweight title fight unannounced in the seventh round. Wearing a chute powered by a giant fan, Miller, 29, crashes into the outdoor ring and tumbles onto the apron, where he's pummeled by Bowe's entourage. "It was a heavyweight fight, and I was the only guy who got knocked out," says Miller.

April 1997 As Florida's Billy the Marlin drops toward Pro Player Stadium, he loses his head at 7,000 feet. Literally. Wanting to spare children the sight of a headless mascot, the Navy SEAL inside the costume diverts himself into the parking lot. The head is found on the Florida Turnpike after three troubling months. "I was worried that it might turn up on a bank robber," says Florida's Jeff Conine. "I didn't want somebody to start wearing Billy's head and go on a crime spree."

The Pop Culture Grid

How do sports stars fit in?	Weirdest celeb name you ever heard	I'm totally addicted to . . .	Favorite song to dance to	Kimmel, Leno or Letterman	____ should play my coach on-screen
BRIAN ANDERSON White Sox CF	Djimon Hounsou	Texting and online shopping	Any boy-band song	Leno	Cheech Marin (Ozzie Guillen)
BOBBY CARPENTER Cowboys LB	Apple, Gwyneth Paltrow's daughter	Working out	*Cupid Shuffle*	Leno	Bill Pullman (Wade Phillips)
JAMES RILEY Earthquakes D	Coco Crisp (*below*, in milk)	*Rock Band*, iChat and Korean food	*Put On* by Young Jeezy	Leno	David Duchovny (Frank Yallop)
ANDY SONNANSTINE Devil Rays P	Iceberg Slim	*Rock Band*	*Hip Hop Saved My Life* by Lupe Fiasco	Leno	Malcolm McDowell (Joe Maddon)

Go Figure

1 Players from Luxembourgh who have advanced to the fourth round of a Grand Slam tournament: Gillis Muller, who beat No. 18 Nicolas Almagro, at the U.S. Open on Sunday.

130 Muller's world ranking.

16 Wins for Red Sox righty Daisuke Matsuzaka, which ties Hideo Nomo's major league record for a Japanese pitcher.

10 Games, the length of the Indians' winning streak that ended last Friday; Cleveland is the first team since 2004 to have double-digit winning and losing streaks in the same season.

11 Blown saves—in 27 opportunities—by the Mets since the All-Star Game.

9 Blown saves by the Yankees and the Blue Jays all season, the fewest in the majors.

348 Rushing yards for Navy senior Shun White (on 19 carries) in a 41–13 win over Towson State last Saturday, a performance that broke Eddie Meyers's 27-year-old school record by 50 yards.

48 Years since Lincoln University of Chester County, Pa.—the nation's oldest historically black university—played a football game before last Saturday, when the Lions beat George Mason 34–7.

V.J. LOVERO (BILLY THE MARLIN); DPPUDICOM (PARACHUTE); PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY SUMAGING (PARACHUTE, BILLY THE MARLIN); LENNY IGNELZI/AP (JAMES MILLER); RONALD C. MOORA/SPORTS IMAGERY/GETTY IMAGES (ORIOLE); TODD WILLIAMSON/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES (LENO); DUSTIN SNIPES/ICON SMI (ANDERSON); SILVER SCREEN COLLECTION/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES (MARIN); RONALD MARTINEZ/GETTY IMAGES (CARPENTER); DAVID SILVERMAN/MLS/GETTY IMAGES (RILEY); TOM DIPACE (SONNANSTINE); GARY BOGDON (CRISP)

HANGIN' WITH AARON ROSS

NEW YORK GIANTS CORNERBACK

AARON ROSS IS ONE OF THE FASTEST CORNERBACKS IN THE NFL, yet he's not even the fastest member of his household. That distinction falls to Sanya Richards, Ross' fiancée and one of U.S. Track & Field's brightest stars. A two-time world champion and 2008 Olympic gold medalist in the 4x400 meter relay, Richards holds the U.S. record at that distance (48.70 seconds). Ross is doing pretty well himself: he was a member of the 2005 national champion Texas Longhorns and won last season's Super Bowl as a rookie with the Giants. Off the field, the couple enjoys relaxing in their New Jersey home. With all that activity, rest is well deserved.

ALL IN THE FAMILY **How did you and Sanya meet?** I was at the Texas Relays in Austin (in 2003) with my mom and brother, and I saw her run. I guess you could say I liked what I saw. I told my mom that I hoped to get her when I got back to school at Texas that fall. **So it was a college romance?** My best friend and roommate, Tarell Brown, was talking to her sister Shari and one night I said, 'Put Sanya on the phone.' We met at a café on campus and I took her to dinner, and it's been all good since then. **What side of Sanya do people not see on the track?** The big, playful kid. She's always got to be the center of attention, and she has me laughing all day with her antics. On the track, she doesn't smile until she's won, but off the track she is the sweetest, most playful person. **You proposed last fall on national TV before a game against Washington, but what had more folks talking was the size of the ring. Crazy, huh?** (laughing) She wouldn't take it off. She always runs with it, too. It might be extravagant, but she deserved it. My guy Alex the jeweler hooked me up.

"If you're doing well here, everyone hears about it. When you're winning ... everybody loves you."

SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY **As a native Texan, what's it like to live in New York?** I love it here. But at first, I guess I was used to the laid-back southern hospitality. You might open up the door for somebody and they won't say anything back—they just walk right in. I learned pretty quickly. **What's the best part of New York?** The media. If you're doing well here, everyone hears about it. You always enjoy hearing good things about yourself. When you're winning, which we did, everybody loves you. **What do you do at home in your downtime?** Just relax in the boom-boom room (above). Everything I need is here—movies, games, mini-fridge. I basically live here. **Where'd that name come from?** The movie *Life* with Eddie Murphy. When we were looking for a place, I told Sanya that I wanted a boom-boom room. The rest was up to her.

A LITTLE INSPIRATION **Who did you look up to as a kid, athletically?** Deion Sanders. Being a defensive back, he was the guy. *Primetime* could shut down half the field, and do it with jazz, attitude and swagger. That's what I want to do. **What other sports do you play?** Basketball. We got a chance to play a little bit at training camp. Corey Webster had the best jump shot and beat most everybody in P-I-G, except for me. I beat him once, so we're tied at 1. **You've won a college title and the Super Bowl. Which was better?** That's a good question. The Super Bowl is the ultimate goal for all players, but college was just as fun. We beat USC, and we were all like brothers there. I still love to throw up the 'Horns, man.

WITH LOU DUBOIS

PHOTO BY MIKE STOBE

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Dollar Menu

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SI, July 28, 2008

Update

EVEN AS Barry Bonds hopes to return to the big leagues—at an Aug. 9 appearance at 3Com Park he reminded the crowd, "I haven't retired"—government lawyers are focused on the home run king's day in court. Bonds is set to go on trial on March 2, charged with lying to a grand jury about his use of steroids, and the prosecution might be bolstered by testimony from Greg Anderson, Bonds's former trainer who served three months in prison for distributing steroids and money laundering.

BAGGAGE HANDLER Bonds (on Aug. 9) says he's not retired.

Anderson has so far refused to testify about Bonds (and thus spent a year in prison for contempt), and so the development, as revealed by *The New York Times* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, that Anderson's mother-in-law, Madeleine Gestas, is being investigated by U.S. attorneys for possible tax violations, is seen by some as a tactic that could pressure Anderson to testify. Anderson's wife, Nicole, had previously received a letter saying she could be charged with conspiracy to commit a crime, and her lawyer, Charles Smith, told the *Times* that targeting the women is "unfair." The tangled, ugly situation is a reminder of why a still dangerous slugger can't find a job. □

Faces in the Crowd

Andretti Bain

NASSAU, BAHAMAS > Track and Field

Bain, a graduate student at Oral Roberts, won an Olympic silver medal for the Bahamas as part of the 4×400 relay team. The Golden Eagles' first medalist, he ran the lead leg in 45.92. In 2008 he became the sixth athlete to win the NCAA indoor and outdoor 400 championships in the same year.

Courtney Mathewson

ANAHEIM HILLS, CALIF. > Water Polo

Mathewson, a recent graduate of UCLA, won the Peter J. Cutino Award as the nation's top collegiate female water polo player. An attacker, she scored 111 career goals, including 54 as a senior, and had 11 in NCAA tournaments as the Bruins won the national title in each of her four seasons.

HIGH SCHOOL VIDEO FACE

Landon Hatfield

POWERED BY TAKKLE

CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA. > Speedskating

Landon, a senior at Albemarle High, is the 2008 U.S. Short Track Junior Men's national champion. He won the 500, 1,000 and 1,500 meters, the last in junior-record time (2:27.633), and will compete in this month's American Cup, which is a World Cup qualifier.

TO SEE LANDON'S VIDEO, GO TO Takkle.com/videofaces.

Jake Bohn

KENTWOOD, MICH. > Wrestling

Bohn, a George Mason–bound graduate of East Kentwood High, set the national record with 526 takedowns this year and the Michigan career record with 1,365. He was 178–39 in high school and qualified for the state championships four times, finishing as high as second as a senior at 160 pounds.

Tiana Yocam

ELBERT, COLO. > Rodeo

Tiana, a junior at Kiowa High, won the National Little Britches Rodeo Association barrel racing championship in the senior girls' division on her horse, Midnight. She finished second in barrel racing in her first Colorado Pro Rodeo Association event and has won six other championship saddles.

Cat Hosfield

MURFREESBORO, TENN. > Softball

Hosfield, a Tennessee-bound graduate of Riverdale High, is the National High School Coaches Association player of the year and will be inducted into its Hall of Fame. She set the national record for strikeouts as a junior with 659 in 257 innings and as a senior had 124 in 54⅔ innings before breaking her ankle.

NOMINATE NOW ON SI.COM

To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd or to submit a video Face to Takkle.com, go to **SI.com/faces.**

FROM TOP: ORU ATHLETICS; UCLA ATHLETICS; SHARON R. FORD; LAWRENCE HEIBEL PHOTOGRAPHY; COURTESY OF STEVE BEABER; MICHAELS PHOTOGRAPHY; DAMON TARVER/CAL SPORT MEDIA (BONDS)

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Week Ahead

What to watch and watch for By Sarah Kwak

FRIDAY 9/5

Basketball Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony Among the seven being enshrined in Springfield are two big men—Patrick Ewing and Hakeem Olajuwon—and one big mouth: commentator (and former Rutgers and Detroit coach) **Dick Vitale (right)**. No word on whether his display will include an audio component. Let's hope not, baby! **ESPN Classic 7:30 p.m.**

SATURDAY 9/6

U.S. Open Women's Final The No. 1 spot is up for grabs thanks to France's Julie Coin. The world's 188th-ranked player shocked top seed Ana Ivanovic last week, knocking the Serb from her perch atop the WTA rankings. Expect a push from No. 6 **Elena Dementieva (left)** of Russia, who is looking for her first career Grand Slam win. The Olympic gold medalist hasn't lost a set in her first four matches. **CBS 7 p.m.**

Miami at No. 5 Florida These Sunshine State rivals, who haven't met since the Hurricanes joined the ACC in 2004, revive their feud. At stake in the Battle for the Seminole War Canoe is an authentic Native American boat. The Hurricanes hold a 28–25 edge over the Gators and have won the last six matchups. **ESPN 8 p.m.**

SUNDAY 9/7

Angels at White Sox With a 17-game lead over their closest divisional rival, the Angels aren't playing for much. And it shows—Anaheim has lost 10 of its last 18. That's good news for the White Sox, who are in a dogfight with the Twins in the AL Central. Chicago's Ken Griffey, batting .250 since joining the team last month, is hoping his new team can take him to the postseason, for just the third time in his 19-year career. **TBS 1 p.m.**

TUESDAY 9/9

Kicking It Making its TV debut after a long tour on the film festival circuit (including Sundance and Tribeca), this acclaimed documentary tells the stories of six players at the 2006 Homeless World Cup in Cape Town, South Africa. **ESPN2 9 p.m.**

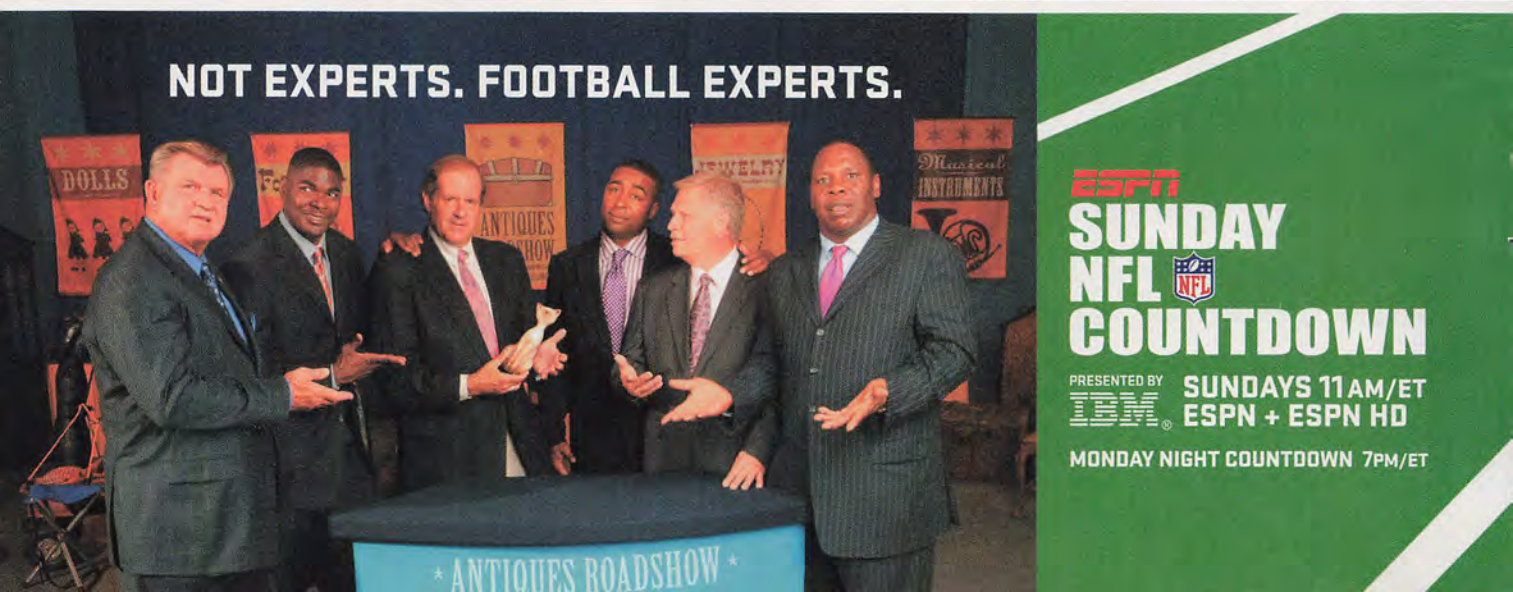
PICK OF THE WEEK

MONDAY 9/8

Vikings at Packers

Some friendly advice to Green Bay quarterback Aaron Rodgers *(right)*, who will be making his first career start: Maybe invest in a little extra padding. The Vikings' defense was bruising last year, and the acquisition of defensive end Jared Allen *(left)*—who as a Chief led the NFL with 15.5 sacks in 2007—makes the squad even more intimidating. Said Allen, "Hopefully, I can put my helmet square in the back of [Rodgers's] spine. If I can do that and knock the ball loose, it'll be a good day." Yeah, let's make that a *lot* of extra padding. **ESPN 7 p.m.**

SCOTT BOEHM/GETTY IMAGES (ALLEN); TOM LYNN (RODGERS); NIC BOTHMA/EPA (KICKING IT); JESSICA KLUETMEIER (DEMENTIEVA); HEINZ KLUETMEIER (VITALE)



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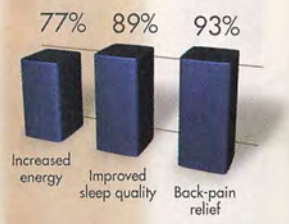

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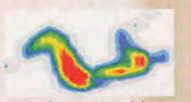
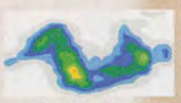


Red areas reveal the pressure points created by an ordinary bed.



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Just My Type

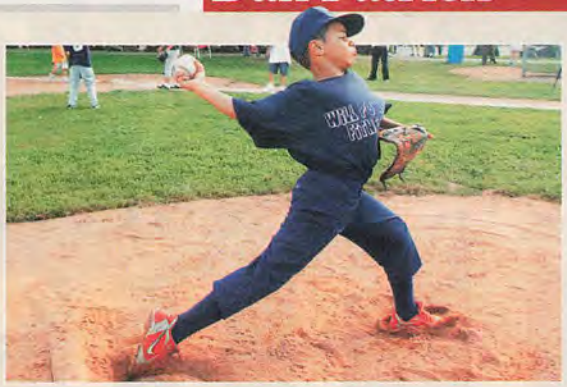
The Interview

Tiger Woods

SIDELINED SUPERSTAR

He's limping at home on his surgically repaired left knee but walks just fine in the Tiger Woods PGA Tour '09 *video game*

Dan Patrick: *Let's just get it out in the open. In your condition I think I could beat you in golf.*
Tiger Woods: This is very true. I could maybe take you in Putt-Putt. That's about it.
DP: *Have you been putting?*
TW: No. I've been cleared to do that now if I want to, but there's really no need.
DP: *What's tougher for you: to miss playing in a major or to lose in a major?*
TW: It's certainly much more difficult not being able to compete.
DP: *I saw the video game. I thought there would be a special button we could push to have you limp. Did EA Sports think about putting that in?*
TW: No, golly no. I hope I never have to go through that again. [Laughs.]
DP: *Have you looked at video of the U.S. Open?*
TW: I've only seen a highlight package from it. It's frustrating for me to watch because I didn't realize I was that hurt. You're in the moment.
DP: *At the U.S. Open someone told me that if you weren't in contention, you probably weren't going to try to play on Saturday or Sunday. Any truth to that?*
TW: That is completely false.
DP: *Best and worst day since the U.S. Open?*
TW: Probably the worst day was right after the procedure, just the uncomfortableness of the whole thing. Best day is probably every day I get to spend with [14-month-old daughter] Sam and watch her grow. And she's making fun of me because she's actually running faster than me and always looking back to see if I'm still coming.
DP: *What part of fatherhood is better than you thought it was going to be?*
TW: True love.
DP: *She looks at you and you know that. . . ?*
TW: Yes, that's it.
DP: *Best win of your career?*
TW: Probably the one I just had, with all the things I had to endure.
DP: *Best golfer in the world today?*
TW: Probably either Phil [Mickelson] or Paddy [Harrington]. Paddy's just won two majors but hasn't had the number of high finishes that Phil has had over a longer period.
DP: *Can I circle a date when you're coming back?*
TW: I wish I knew.



Nine the Hard Way

ANYONE WHO PLAYED baseball as a kid remembers going up against a pitcher who made your knees knock. It's a great memory, isn't it? The kids in New Haven, Conn., will never know. Officials there ruled that then nine-year-old Jericho Scott couldn't pitch Little League because he throws too hard (40 mph). When Scott's team refused to change his position, the league disbanded the team. Then lawyers were called in, and the story became everything it shouldn't be. I asked the N.Y. Rangers' Chris Drury—he was the winning pitcher in the 1989 Little League World Series—about it, and he said the reaction should have been, "Grab a bat and see if you can hit this kid. That's what sports is all about."

JOHN FOGERTY

Centerfield '08

(New Haven Little League remix)

Don't put me in, Coach, I'm not ready to play, today
Don't put me in, Coach, I'm not ready to play, today
If Jericho Scott throws at me, I won't be, centerfield

Here's a Tip

MAYBE THE oddest news story out of Beijing: Jason Kidd gave his gold medal to Elaine Wynn, wife of Las Vegas hotelier Steve, as thanks for what must have been a *really* nice room. If he were going to hand the medal off to someone, these might have been better choices.

- **RENALDO WYNN** No relation to Steve, but at least the Giants defensive end is an athlete.
- **LIU XIANG**, the injured Chinese hurdler. You want to pay back some hosts, how about the host nation?
- **MARK CUBAN** So Kidd can say he won *something* for the Mavs' owner who bet the ranch on him.
- **MICHAEL PHELPS** In case he loses one.

1972: Now and Forever

ROGER GOODELL sounds intent on expanding the NFL schedule to 17 or 18 games. If this happens—Goodell told me it would be 2010 at the earliest—it's another win for the 1972 Dolphins. This would make it even harder for another team to be perfect: more games to win, and more weeks for undefeated teams to think about resting starters. Nick Buoniconti and friends should pop another cork.

THE FINE PRINT: Details of the Bengals' new contract with Chris Henry. It's for two years, but with good behavior he'll be out in one.

ILLUSTRATION BY KEITH WITMER; DOUGLAS HEALEY/AP (SCOTT); PAUL BUTTERFIELD/GETTY IMAGES (FOGERTY); ROBERT BECK (TIGER WOODS); SPECIAL CONTRIBUTORS: KIRK GIBSON, WILLIS REED, KERRI STRUG

The Tide Is Turning

On an opening weekend that produced a handful of surpri

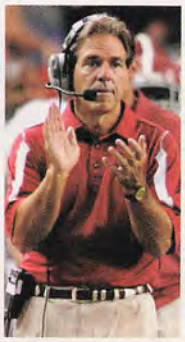
Sports Illustrated

STEPPING OUT Playing in his first college game, Ingram dashed through the Clemson defense for a game-high 96 rushing yards.

ses, none was bigger than Alabama's dominance of Clemson

BY AUSTIN MURPHY | *Photograph by* Bob Rosato

HE IS THIS intriguing blend of New Age and Old School. But with kickoff against ninth-ranked Clemson looming last Saturday night in the Georgia Dome, Nick Saban dispensed with the psychobabble and channeled the Bear. "If we're going to win this game," Alabama's glowering second-year coach told his charges, "our defensive line is going to have to whip their offensive line." ¶ Having issued that challenge, the man with the perma-tan watched his D-line, anchored by SUV-sized noseguard Terrence Cody, rise to it. While it was the Tigers who came into this Chick-fil-A College Kickoff with arguably the nation's top tailback tandem in James Davis and C.J. Spiller, 'Bama outrushed Clemson, 239 yards to . . . zero.



"Doesn't matter how good they are," noted Crimson Tide linebacker Brandon (Knock You on Yo') Fanney, "if they got no hole to go through." The 34–10 score barely hints at Alabama's soup-to-nuts domination of a squad thought to be the class of the ACC. It is also an indication that Saban has this storied program on track to return to the grandeur that many of its fans still consider their birthright.

Clemson's no-show in the Georgia Dome was the lowlight of a rough weekend for the ACC, whose teams failed to win a single meaningful matchup. Virginia was overwhelmed 52–7 by a USC squad whose offense, directed by first-year starter Mark Sanchez, rolled up 558 total yards. Virginia Tech coach Frank Beamer looked on in disbelief as East Carolina used a bit of Beamerball—a blocked punt returned 27 yards for a touchdown with 1:52 left—to upset his 17th-ranked Hokies 27–22. Feeling Beamer's pain was Pitt coach Dave Wannstedt, whose Big East team took a No. 25 ranking against Bowling Green and was dealt a buzz-killing 27–17 loss at home *(box, page 35)*.

No upset was more shocking than the Beatdown in A-Town. After a summer of hearing how loaded they were at the skill positions and how superb their chances were of winning their first ACC football title in 17 years, the Tigers were simply outhit and outclassed in every phase of the game. "We got whipped about every way you can get whipped," coach Tommy Bowden acknowledged afterward. "Obviously, we're not the ninth-best team in the country."

FOR THOSE born too late or those who weren't paying attention in the 1960s and '70s, when Bear Bryant–coached 'Bama was collecting SEC and national titles with numbing regularity, this is what Alabama football is supposed to look like:

- A physical, swarming defense, which intended to do more than keep Clemson off the scoreboard. "We wanted to get into their heads," said Fanney. "We wanted to intimidate them." Added All-SEC free safety Rashad Johnson, "A lot of what they tried to do, we'd seen on film. If 28 [Spiller] and 1 [Davis] were on the field at the same time, we knew 28 would run a flare and 1 would stay in. We adjusted our pressures accordingly."
- An offensive line, led by senior center Antoine Caldwell, blowing huge holes in a front seven composed, apparently, of paper Tigers. "We thought we might have an opportunity to be the more physical team," said Caldwell, laboring to be diplomatic. "They have such great speed on defense that all you can really do is run straight at them."
- Two tailbacks, each of whom refused to go down on a single hit. Time will tell whether junior Glen Coffee (90 yards on 17 carries)

GOOD STUFF Chavis Williams (55) had one of three sacks of Harper, giving the hard-to-please Saban (inset) reason to applaud.

DAVID BERGMAN (SABAN); BOB ROSATO

TODD KIRKLAND/ICON SMI

RAMBLIN' Dwyer needed only 11 carries to gain 112 yards and score two touchdowns.

Running All the Way

Who needs the spread? Not Paul Johnson, who fired up his triple-option offense in Georgia Tech's opening win

IN AN AGE of shotgun formations and five-receiver sets, first-year Georgia Tech coach Paul Johnson—to paraphrase the late conservative icon William F. Buckley Jr.—stands athwart college football, yelling, Stop! at a time when few are inclined to do so. Indeed, of the 18 Division I-A coaches in new positions this year, nine installed a variation of the spread, the pass-happy system that has swept college football (SI, Aug. 11). Then there's Johnson, who in six years at Navy won 45 games and went to five bowls before bringing his triple-option offense to Atlanta last December.

Last Thursday night the Yellow Jackets successfully rolled out their old-fashioned, ground-based attack—"the perfect option," as Johnson calls it—in a 41–14 drubbing of Division I-AA Jacksonville State at Bobby Dodd Stadium. After opening with a long pass that fell incomplete (one of only 15 attempts by Georgia Tech), the Jackets ran the ball 46 times for 349 yards and six touchdowns. "There's just too many issues with this offense for people to deal with," Gamecocks coach Jack Crowe said after the game. "We had two and a half weeks. The rest of these folks will get two days. Good luck, ACC."

That's a far cry from what was heard before the season opener, when Johnson—who also used the triple option in winning consecutive I-AA championships in 1999 and 2000 as coach at Georgia Southern—was besieged by a legion of vociferous doubters. The Ramblin' Wreck's shaky performance in its spring game, replete with fumbles and missed blocking assignments, didn't do anything to silence critics. But Johnson is quick to point out that his system has already been ACC-tested: In his last four seasons at Annapolis, he went 4–3 against teams in the conference. And at Georgia Tech he will be running the option with some of the best athletes to whom he's ever had access, including fullback Jonathan Dwyer, a 6-foot, 228-pound sophomore who scored twice against Jacksonville State and averaged 10.2 yards on 11 up-the-gut carries.

Afterward, Johnson talked earnestly about how much work his team still has to do before facing Boston College and Virginia Tech in the next two weeks. But Dwyer didn't hesitate to give his unit credit: "We showed our fans and the nation what this offense can do."

Here's how six other marquee coaching debuts turned out last weekend.

ARKANSAS Bobby Petrino
Defeated Western Illinois 28–24
Narrowly avoiding a disaster in front of a stunned home crowd, Petrino's squad overcame a 10-point, fourth-quarter deficit to the Division I-AA Leathernecks. Casey Dick's limited ability as a passer might force Petrino to rely more on the running game.

MICHIGAN Rich Rodriguez
Lost to Utah 25–23
Nick Sheridan and Steven Threet fulfilled the concern that they were ill-suited to run Rodriguez's spread attack, completing 19 of 38 passes combined in generating only 203 yards of offense. The weekend wasn't a total loss for RichRod: On Sunday he got a verbal commitment from Tate Forcier, a four-star, dual-threat QB from San Diego.

MISSISSIPPI Houston Nutt
Defeated Memphis 41–24
QB Jevan Snead, a Texas transfer, struggled at times, and RB Dexter McCluster stole the show. Playing out of the Wildhog direct-snap formation that Nutt installed at Arkansas for Darren McFadden—and redubbed the Wild Rebel on Saturday—McCluster ran for 65 yards on six carries, including a 32-yard touchdown dash.

NEBRASKA Bo Pelini
Defeated Western Michigan 47–24
Though the Huskers gave up three 80-yard touchdown drives, their defense, with the likes of LB Cody Glenn, should be better than last year's. The converted RB had 12 tackles (2½ for losses), three pass breakups and a forced fumble.

SMU June Jones
Lost to Rice 56–27
The Mustangs had their moments in their new run-and-shoot offense, just not enough of them. Freshman QB Bo Levi Mitchell threw three touchdown passes—and three interceptions.

TEXAS A&M Mike Sherman
Lost to Arkansas State 18–14
The folly of Sherman's forcing a pro-style system on QB Stephen McGee, an option whiz who's at his best on the run, was plain to see. The senior threw two interceptions and was sacked four times. *—Mark Beech*

One Giant Leap

Expectations are so high at Missouri that even scoring 52 points on a Top 25 foe left the Tigers wanting more

HIS TEAM had just lit up the scoreboard with more than 50 points, beaten a ranked opponent in a season opener for the first time in 28 years, and delighted the giddy faithful who had made the sojourn from Columbia, Mo., to St. Louis and packed the Edward Jones Dome. But when a beaming Gary Pinkel entered the Missouri locker room in the moments after his club's 52–42 win over No. 20 Illinois last Saturday night, the perpetually upbeat, Harley-riding coach soon realized that he was about the only guy in the room smiling. "That was a little upsetting; you should enjoy a win," Pinkel said later. "But am I kind of glad the players were disappointed? Yeah. Am I glad that I had to get them cranked up a bit to get them to smile? Yeah."

That the Tigers—last year's biggest surprise with a 12–2 record and a No. 4 finish in the AP poll—were anything less than elated after a win over a Top 25 team that played in a BCS bowl last January shows how expectations have dramatically changed at a school that hasn't won a conference title since 1969. "We were sloppy, and the game was closer than it should have been," senior defensive end Stryker Sulak said. "We have big goals this season, and to reach them we have to play better."

Yes, Missouri saw a 25-point second-half lead dwindle to 10 in the fourth quarter. Yes, Illinois junior quarterback Juice Williams, who'd never topped 230 passing yards in a game, shamed the Tigers' secondary by throwing for 451 yards and five touchdowns as he suddenly channeled Donovan McNabb. (Williams worked out with the Philadelphia Eagles star and fellow Chicagoan over the summer.) However, the Tigers still showed that they are a bona fide national championship contender.

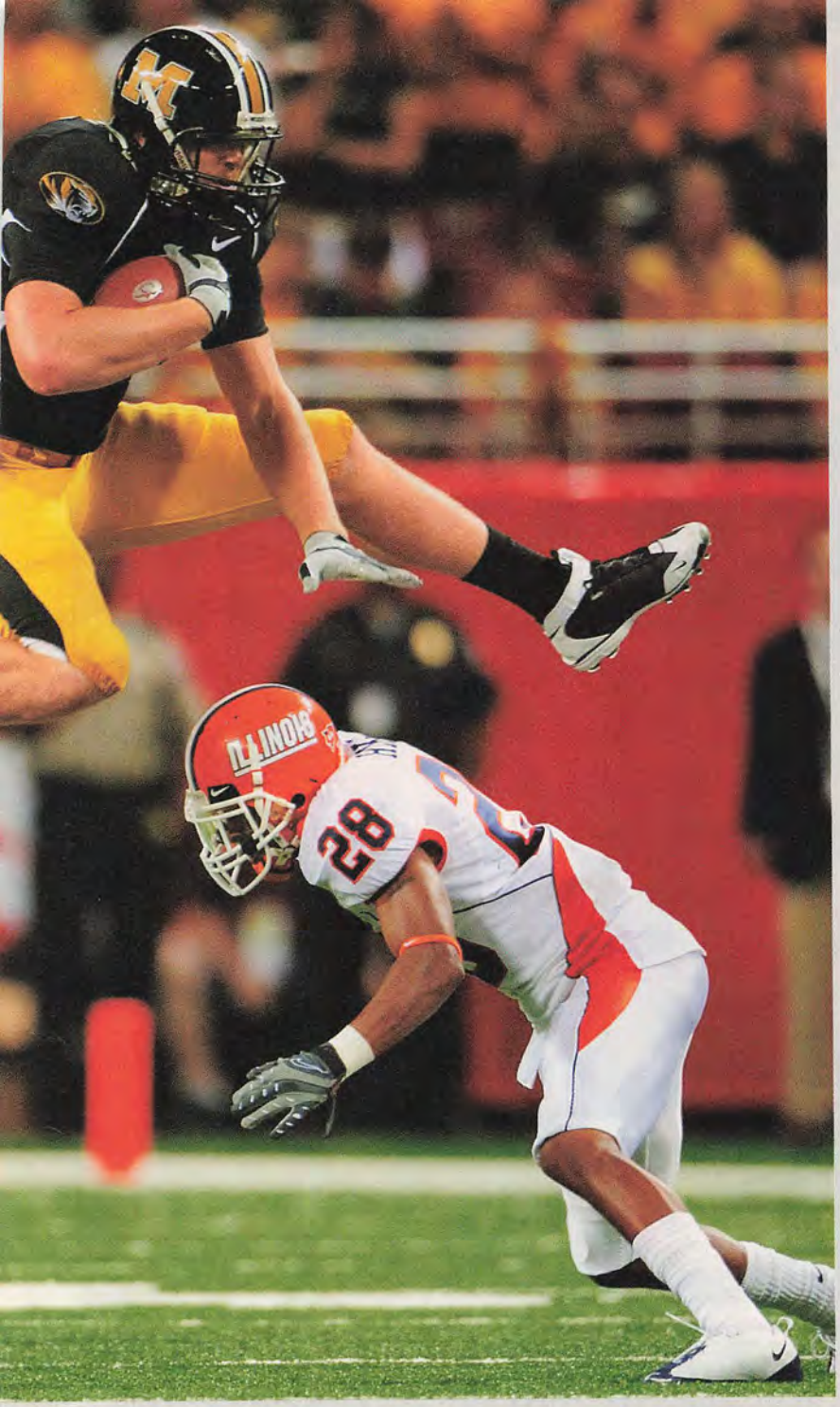
Quarterback Chase Daniel, at the controls of the team's high-octane spread offense, threw for 323 yards and three touchdowns. Show-stopping sophomore wideout Jeremy Maclin, who last season set an NCAA record for all-purpose yards by a freshman, officially launched his Heisman campaign in the second quarter with a 99-yard kickoff return for a touchdown. And senior tight end Chase Coffman, a 6′ 6″, 255-pound All-America candidate who had nine catches for 120 yards, wowed the crowd in the third quarter when he leaped over an Illinois defensive back like an Olympic hurdler, en route to a 21-yard gain.

The night's biggest revelation, however, was sophomore running back Derrick Washington, who dazzled in his first career start with 130 rushing yards and two touchdowns on 19 carries, a performance that suddenly has Columbia buzzing that he may be Missouri's most gifted tailback since James Wilder. The Tigers' offense last year was potent—it ranked fifth in the country in total yards and was the nation's only unit to score at least 30 points in all its regular-season games—but there were signs on Saturday that it can be even more explosive with Washington in the backfield. In front of a crowd of 66,441 that included his parents, the 5′ 11″, 225-pound Washington made his mark on his fourth touch of the game as he powered in for a seven-yard touchdown to cap the Tigers' opening drive. Then in the second quarter he demonstrated his open-field speed by sprinting 40 yards for another score to give Missouri a 24–13 lead.

A native of Peculiar, Mo., Washington has the words RARE BREED tattooed on his right biceps, and he says, "I'm not familiar with the term *traditional running back*." This offseason he hit the weight room and bulked up 25 pounds—"I'm not scared to pound it inside anymore," he says—but what has impressed his coaches the most are his hands. Growing up four hours from the Edward Jones Dome, Washington modeled his game after former St. Louis Rams great Marshall Faulk and current Rams star Steven Jackson, versatile backs with the ability to hurt teams in a variety of ways. Though he made just one catch against Illinois, Washington frequently lined up as a wideout; Missouri coaches believe their running back will emerge as one of Daniel's favorite targets this season. (Last year's lead back, Tony Temple, caught just seven balls all season.) "You just got a preview of what Derrick can

HIGH OCTANE Coffman (top) hurdled an Illini defender on one of his nine catches, while Washington (24) ran for 130 yards.

JOHN BIEVER (2)



do," says Daniel. "There's a lot we can do with him in this offense—we won't reach our true potential until we figure out how to use him best."

That, in turn, will only raise the profile of the Tigers, who were playing in their fourth straight nationally televised game on Saturday. In Daniel and Maclin, the Tigers have two players who are widely regarded as Heisman front-runners. (Missouri's sports information department is launching Daniel's candidacy this week by sending out 2,500 ViewMasters, loaded with images of Daniel, to members of the media.) If the Tigers can find a way to win at Nebraska (on Oct. 4) for the first time since 1978, they should enter their Oct. 18 game at Texas with a 6–0 record and their eyes on their first-ever BCS berth. "We had a great year last season," says Daniel, "but we think we're better this year. And we're a lot better than what we showed [against Illinois]."

For the rest of the Big 12—and the rest of the country—that's a scary thought.

—Albert Chen

and freshman Mark Ingram (96 on 17) are that good—that *tough*—or if Clemson's defenders all had, on the same night, the poorest tackling games of their careers.

What's certain is that the Tide established its identity in Week 1. "Nobody's a star," Coffee said. "Everybody's down and dirty, gritty. We want other teams to fear us."

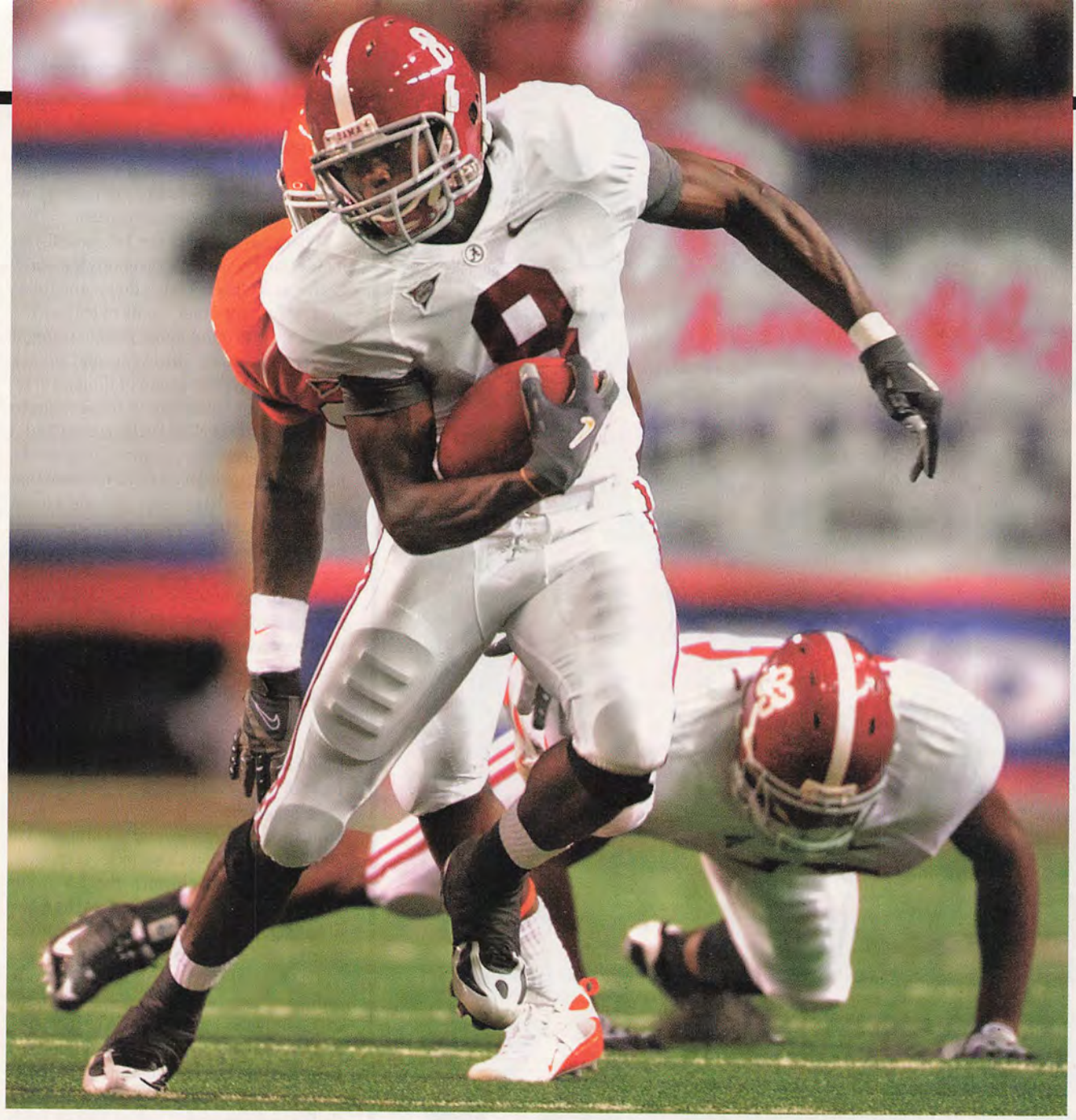
With the ground game going strong, it wasn't long before third-year quarterback John Parker Wilson began dialing up play-action passes. The bulk of those went to senior tight end Nick Walker, who had a career-high seven receptions for 67 yards, including a 21-yarder on third-and-two that kept a scoring drive alive. Making a great show of blocking down on the defensive tackle, Walker suddenly released from the scrum and in three strides was alone in the middle of the field, where Wilson had no trouble finding him. "They like to bite on that," said a smiling Walker, whose four-yard touchdown catch capped the 14-play drive, which devoured 8:16 and gave 'Bama a 20–3 lead midway through the second quarter.

By bogarting the ball, Alabama kept Clemson's offense off the field for all but 18:47 of the game. The Tigers' five first-half possessions ended fumble, punt, field goal, punt and interception, and generated all of 70 yards on 23 snaps. That pick—of quarterback Cullen Harper by cornerback Marquis Johnson at the Alabama 28—had the effect of hitting the mute button on the Clemson-orange half of the Georgia Dome.

The neutral-site matchup was the brainchild of Gary Stokan, president of the Chick-fil-A Bowl, a man driven by the fierce, dual urges to jazz up college football's opening weekend and "to expand our bowl brand." He is a relentless flack for that brand. When Spiller took the second-half kickoff 96 yards for a touchdown, Stokan exclaimed, "He must've had Chick-fil-A at halftime!"

Scintillating though it was, Spiller's return, which cut Alabama's lead to 23–10, failed to rattle the Crimson Tide. "Didn't faze us in the least," declared defensive end Brandon Deaderick. "I'm telling you, we're tight. We're a closer team than last year. We trust each other."

YEAR ONE under Saban was turbulent in Tuscaloosa, even by the soap-opera standards of the Alabama program, cursed forever to search for an heir to the Bear. The Tide lost to Louisiana-Monroe in the midst of an 0–4 pratfall to end the regular season. (It took a win over



DAVID BERGMAN

Spiller's kickoff return "didn't faze us in the least," said Deaderick. "We're a closer team than last year. We **TRUST EACH OTHER.**"

Colorado in the Independence Bowl to finish 7–6.) A pair of assistants bailed for better jobs. And so many Alabama players have been arrested in Saban's short tenure—10, at last count, including two charged with felonies who were kicked off the team—that rival fans have taken to wearing T-shirts bearing the legend PAROLE TIDE.

There was good news interspersed with the bad. By Rivals.com's reckoning, Saban reeled in the nation's top recruiting class, including the No. 1 wideout, 6' 4", 210-pound Julio Jones of Foley, Ala. The 19-year-old stunned onlookers in a recent scrimmage when he tracked down a deep ball, broke the cornerback's tackle, then stiff-armed Rashad Johnson to the turf on his way to the end zone. After video of the play appeared on the Web-based TideTV, Saban ordered it taken down. "That's why we close practice," he said, "so the other team can't see us." Too late. The footage was already on YouTube.

With 4:08 left in the third quarter last Saturday, Wilson and Jones hooked up for a four-yard touchdown, unleashing from the 'Bama stands a thunderous "HOOOO-lio!" Best get used to that sound, SEC.

Saban's recruiting prowess is beyond doubt. Keeping his players off police blotters

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CRAZY OVER EIGHT After the highly touted Jones scored in his debut, Alabama fans let out a boisterous "HOOOO-lio!"

once they get to Tuscaloosa requires some work. After pleading with his guys to exercise better judgment, he took steps to help them do that. Those who spent the summer on campus were enrolled in a dozen mental conditioning classes, designed to improve, in Saban's words, the "self-actualization, self-confidence [and] self-esteem" of his players. Instructors from the Pacific Institute led the players through a series of exercises and affirmations. This sampling appeared recently in *The Birmingham News*: "Our team is a family. We will look out for each other. We love one another. Anything that attempts to tear us apart only makes us stronger."

While this chanting and forced introspection had many players squirming and uncomfortable at first, "that was the point," says Caldwell. "It's all about leaving your comfort zone. Since January we've put a lot of emphasis on improving the team chemistry." That included the elimination of cliques. "We've been bowling, shooting pool, playing cards, different things just to get everybody feeling comfortable together. We're closer this year than we've ever been."

THAT UNITY will be tested, naturally, over the course of an SEC season. Working hard to throw a wet blanket on the win over Clemson was Saban, who has been known to grumble, after winning his opener, "We can still go 1–11." On Saturday he said, "Nobody can be satisfied with a one-game performance. This will be a challenge for our team, and it will be interesting to see how they respond."

Less inclined to adopt the head man's Eeyore outlook were the 'Bama fans at the Georgia Dome, who stood as one during a late stoppage of play. A cross section of the faithful, seated behind the Tide bench, included a twentysomething guy sporting a houndstooth ball cap, a graying couple who looked to be in their 60s and a man with his young granddaughter in her spangled crimson top. Thrusting miniature pom-poms in the recirculated air, they all lent their voices to an old Alabama standard. Seldom have these lyrics from the *Rammer Jammer Cheer* rung truer:

Hey Tigers!
Hey Tigers!
We just beat the hell out of you! □

STREETER LECKA/GETTY IMAGES

BREAKTHROUGH Lee got all ball as the Pirates beat the Hokies at their own game.

Blockbusters

A focus on special teams and ball-stripping drills helped East Carolina and Bowling Green score two for the little guys

IN HIS 21 seasons as Virginia Tech's coach, Frank Beamer had witnessed a scene like this so many times. Tight game, fourth down, snap to the punter. Defenders hurtle through the line's gaps. One of them gets a paw on the punt, scoops it up and streaks the other way. Game-changing result.

Last Saturday at Bank of America Stadium in Charlotte, though, the punt blocker wasn't wearing Virginia Tech's maroon and the ball-hawking special teams for which Beamer has become famous didn't belong to the Hokies. Instead it was East Carolina reserve wideout T.J. Lee who returned the punt he had blocked with 1:52 left to give his team a 27–22 win over the No. 17 Hokies. Coach Skip Holtz's Pirates had just Beamer-balled Beamer.

The roots of that block reach back to East Carolina's preseason camp, at which Holtz had every skill-position player audition for the punt-return team. "We wanted to be more aggressive, and we found the guys who were going to go get it," says Holtz. On Saturday, Lee did just that, and the Pirates had their second straight win against a ranked team. (They beat No. 22 Boise State 41–38 in the Hawaii Bowl last December.)

Against the Hokies, East Carolina had stormed back from a 14–0 deficit, the same score by which Bowling Green trailed early in its upset of No. 25 Pittsburgh. The Panthers, led by running back LeSean McCoy, had a 142–6 edge in total yards in the first quarter, but Falcons coach Gregg Brandon didn't panic. He simply implored his defenders, who he says were missing tackles because they were "a little geeked," to take a few deep breaths and execute the game plan—"to crowd the line, to put as many guys in the gaps as we could and to make [McCoy] run sideways," Brandon says. He also reminded his players to work on stripping the ball, a skill the Falcons practice three times a week in five-minute "turnover-and-ball-security" drills.

The result was that Pittsburgh scored three more points and turned the ball over four times (three on fumbles). Bowling Green came away with a 27–17 victory, its second consecutive opening win over a BCS conference team. (The Falcons won at Minnesota last year.) "You hear so much about how you're going to get your butt kicked—it's all fuel," says Brandon. "Our guys really get fired up to play the big boys." Perhaps the lesson for BCS conference teams, and in particular for Virginia Tech and Pittsburgh, is that they should get a little more fired up to play the little guys. *—Ben Reiter*

Amazin'

Do you believe in miracles? The '69 Mets certainly do—and when they look at the upstart Rays, they see plenty of parallels with their own remarkable run. Will it happen again?

BY LEE JENKINS | *Photograph by* Cliff Welch/Icon SMI

IN AUGUST of 1969 the Chicago Cubs were nine games up in the National League East and seven-year-old Jim Hickey was convinced that he wanted to spend the rest of his life in baseball. By October the Cubs trailed the New York Mets by nine games, and Hickey was reconsidering. His father had to sit him down in their home on the South Side of Chicago and explain that, every so often in baseball, a powerhouse like the Cubs will crumble and an upstart like the Mets will emerge and nobody will understand why.

The Mets, of course, went on to win the World Series, and when rightfielder Ron Swoboda robbed the Baltimore Orioles' Brooks Robinson of a potential game-winning hit in the ninth inning of Game 4, Hickey hurt all over again, his ill will toward the Amazin's not having subsided. Swoboda's act of thievery, snaring a low line drive just inches off the turf at Shea Stadium, summed up the injustice of it all.

Hickey would grow up to pursue a life in baseball, but when he met Swoboda 29 years after the epic grab, the bad feelings flooded back. "I told him it was a trap," Hickey says of the catch. "It was a f------ trap."

Despite that awkward introduction the two became friends. Hickey was the pitching coach at Triple A New Orleans, then an Astros affiliate, and Swoboda the team's TV analyst, and to pass time on road trips, they talked about '69. When Swoboda started reminiscing, Hickey would usually respond, "It was a trap. It was a trap. It was a trap." He could not look at Swoboda without muttering the word "trap" under his breath, often spiced with an expletive.

Today Hickey is the pitching coach for the Tampa Bay Rays, and over this year's All-Star break Swoboda called him to catch up. As they talked about the 2008 Rays, a young team with plenty of talent but no real tradition, a club that was causing fits in its division for two of the most storied franchises in baseball history, they realized that they just as easily could have been talking about the '69 Mets. "It's the same thing," says Swoboda, now 64 and still broadcasting in New Orleans. "I watch Tampa Bay, and they don't know what they can't do. They are playing in their own wonderland. The Red Sox and the Yankees—like the Cubs and the Cardinals in '69—are carrying all the baggage. The Rays can just relax and let it happen. Let the magic happen."

The major league schedule, 162 games long, is built to prevent this kind of magic from happening very often. Over the course of six months, underdogs are exposed and anomalies regress to the mean. But the Rays' collapse, projected for about five months now, still has not begun. September is here, and the Rays remain perched atop the AL East, with the Red Sox nipping at their spikes and the Yankees, well, not so much. This is a franchise that has never played a meaningful game in September, never calculated a magic number, never checked the out-of-town scoreboard and actually cared about the results. But in the next four weeks they will experience the full breadth of September baseball, unlike any other month they have experienced before.

"Here's the difference," says Rays lefty reliever Trever Miller, who previously was on two division-winning Astros clubs. "When you're out of it, you play in September for your next contract. When you're in it, you play in September for your team.

LEAP OF FAITH The success of Ed Charles (5) and the '69 Mets was foretold by their manager; ditto Peña (right) and these Rays.

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16
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RAYS

Things are going to get more difficult for us. We're going to get thrown on the skillet. We're going to get boiled up. And we're going to see how we come out of it."

It only makes sense that they will melt, undone by the champs and the pressure and their own inexperience. But at least one contingent, well versed in the rhythms of September, does not see it going that way. "Everybody is looking for them to break down and fold up," says Cleon Jones, the leftfielder for the '69 Mets. "It won't happen."

"They are playing in their own wonderland," says Swoboda, a '69 Met.

WHEN THE Mets reported to St. Petersburg for spring training in 1969, they were starting their eighth season in the major leagues and had never had a winning record; in '68 they had gone 73–89. But in the first meeting of the spring, manager Gil Hodges told his team that he expected to win the NL East. Jones tried not to laugh. "We were all looking at each other like, 'Is he crazy or something?' " says Jones, now 66 and living in Mobile, Ala. " 'He actually thinks we can win it this year?' "

When the Rays reported to St. Petersburg for spring training this season, they were starting their 10th major league season and also had never had a winning record; in 2007 they'd gone 66–96. But in the first meeting of the spring, manager Joe Maddon told his team that he expected to make the playoffs. He unveiled a slogan—9 = 8—to remind his players that if they gave everything for nine innings, they could claim one of eight postseason spots. "Sure, you say that," designated hitter Cliff Floyd thought to himself. "But do you really see it?"

The Rays went 18–8 in spring training, which for most teams would not be worth mentioning, but for this team was significant. In four of those games their batboy was a 21-year-old private investigator named Jason Glenn Heath, whose father, David, was a spring training batboy for the '69 Mets. David was shot and killed in a St. Petersburg alley in 2001, and Jason wanted to honor him by wearing a major league uniform, as his father had 39 years before. During his interview in February with Brandon (Tank) Richesin, a Rays assistant clubhouse manager, Jason said, "My dad was the batboy for the Miracle Mets, and I think I can bring the same luck to you."

At the All-Star break the Rays were 55–39. At the All-Star break in 1969 the Mets were 53–39. Neither team appeared likely to sustain its success. The Mets were in second, five games behind the Cubs. The Rays, having just lost seven in a row, were also in second, a half game behind Boston. When the Red Sox swung through Tampa Bay in early July, Boston slugger David Ortiz said, "I'm not saying that they will drop, but if you go by the numbers, that's normally what happens. The guys with more experience at the end of the year take over." When Miller was reminded of that statement, he responded, "Well, the Germans had a lot of experience fighting wars, and they still lost."

The day after the All-Star break Maddon gathered the Rays and for the first time acknowledged that their situation was somewhat unique. He wanted his team to realize everything that was at stake, so as not to let it slip away. "This is a very special thing that's going on here," Maddon said. "It doesn't happen on an annual basis. We need to treat it with respect—with a lot of respect."

That night the Rays trailed the Toronto Blue Jays 1–0 in the seventh inning when a utilityman named Ben Zobrist hit a game-winning two-run homer off Blue Jays righthander A.J. Burnett. The next afternoon Rays owner Stuart Sternberg was down on the field taking batting practice with MC Hammer, who was giving a postgame concert that night. In bizarro Tampa Bay everything was back to normal. Thus launched, the Rays started the second half with a major-league-best 29–12 run, overcoming injuries to leftfielder Carl Crawford, third baseman Evan Longoria and closer Troy Percival, three cornerstones of the team.

THE '69 METS believe their season turned in the second game of a doubleheader on July 30, when Houston's Johnny Edwards hit a double down the leftfield line and Jones jogged casually over to play it. Incensed at the lack of hustle, Hodges himself walked all the way out to the outfield to pull Jones from the game. Maddon did not go onto the field on Aug. 15 in Texas, but he did take an extraordinary step, removing B.J. Upton from his position in centerfield because he was angry that Upton had not run out a grounder in the top half of the inning.

GARY BOGDON

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HITTING HOME Peña (left) scored the game-winner in another walk-off win last Saturday, sending Longoria leaping and a pie flying in the face of the heroic Baldelli.

Maddon does not get upset easily, but he also became irritated five days later, against the Los Angeles Angels, when outfielder Justin Ruggiano pulled up and played a fly ball on one hop. "I would prefer seeing you impale yourself," Maddon told Ruggiano. One week later, with the Rays leading Toronto 1–0 and two outs in the ninth inning, Blue Jays catcher Rod Barajas hit a deep drive to leftfield. Taking Maddon's words to heart, Ruggiano crashed into the fence to steal a sure double from Barajas and save the game. It was not Swoboda robbing Robinson in the World Series, but for Tampa Bay it was high drama.

"We did it with pitching and defense," Swoboda says. "That's how they're doing it too." In the 12-team National League the '69 Mets ranked second in ERA (2.99) but eighth in batting average (.242). Among the 14 American League clubs the Rays rank second in ERA (3.70) but 12th in batting average (.261). Without Crawford and Longoria, two of their most dangerous hitters are Carlos Peña, who batted .236 in the first half, and outfielder Rocco Baldelli, who had been through travails worse than a mere slump. The third-place finisher in the 2003 Rookie of the Year voting, Baldelli had once been compared with Joe DiMaggio by former Rays managing partner Vince Naimoli. But he recently had begun suffering from a condition that left him barely able to walk across the field without cramping up and complaining of exhaustion.

Fearing that he would never be able to play again, Baldelli crisscrossed the country last winter to see specialists, but nobody could diagnose him. By spring, tests finally revealed that he was suffering from mitochondrial disorder, a neuromuscular disease. Doctors prescribed 10 supplements to help him keep his energy up. On Aug. 10 Baldelli made his season debut, and on Aug. 22 he hit his first major league home run in 15 months. Two days later he smashed another. Last Saturday he hit a game-winning, ninth-inning double against the Orioles, the Rays' 13th walk-off victory of the season. Baldelli still cannot play every day, and he has to carry a plastic bag full of pills wherever he goes. In the morning, after taking the 10 supplements at once, he often feels sick to his stomach. But he is willing to put up with a little nausea for a bout of pennant fever. "Coming back here is the most satisfying thing I've ever done," says Baldelli. "I didn't want this to pass me by."

BY SEPTEMBER of 1969 the Mets were drawing more than 50,000 fans for almost every game at Shea Stadium. Bench players would ask starters, "You see how many people are out there? Aren't you nervous?" The Rays, alas, do not have that problem. On the last Wednesday in August they drew an appalling 12,678 at Tropicana Field, some 9,000 below their season average, making it hard for an unwitting eyewitness to tell if they were pursuing history or just playing out the string. Attendance is clearly a source of embarrassment, but when the Rays take the field and see a stadium that is more than two-thirds empty, it has a strangely calming effect. Players are able to convince themselves that games in September really are no different from games in May.

"Playing here alleviates some pressure, and in our situation that can be a very good thing," says the 35-year-old Floyd. "I'm going to tell the guys in September, Don't look at whoever is 3½ back, 4½ back, 5½ back. Like right now, we really don't need to be sitting here worrying that the Red Sox are four games back."

Overhearing Floyd, Upton interjected, "Three and a half now."

The next day all four televisions in the Rays' clubhouse were tuned to the Red Sox–Yankees game. After Jason Giambi singled home the game-winner for the Yankees in the bottom of the ninth, Upton raised his right fist. The lead was back to four.

The '69 Mets handled this burden by treating it as a reward. From their perspective, by the time September rolled around (they were 4½ games back when the month started), their season was a success no matter how it ended. So in the final month they were able to relax and by doing so went an astounding 23–7. Since the Rays already lead the AL East, they do not need to go 23–7. They just need a few more helpings of meat loaf. That is Maddon's term for taking two out of three games, a reference to Meatloaf's 1977 hit single *Two Out of Three Ain't Bad*.

By keeping the strategy simple—just take two of three—the Rays are able to ignore the bigger picture, which can be a bit overwhelming. They are in position to complete one of the greatest turnarounds in baseball history, pull off one of the greatest upsets in baseball history and strike a blow for small markets everywhere. The AL East may be the toughest division in all of professional sports, and the Rays are threatening to win it with a payroll just over $40 million, with some of their best players still on the disabled list, with friends and family in the stands and often few others.

It would be amazin'. □

"The Rays can just relax and let it happen. LET THE MAGIC HAPPEN."

STEVE JACOBSON (LONGORIA); GARY BOGDON (BALDELLI)

In Vin Veritas

Dodgers win, Dodgers lose, Dodgers come, Dodgers go, but one truth remains constant: Vin Scully—half a century in the L.A. booth—remains the **play-by-play gold standard**

BY RICHARD HOFFER | *Photograph by* Jon SooHoo/LA Dodgers

WHEN I was a little boy, we lived in a fifth-floor walk-up apartment in New York, and we had a big old radio on four legs, and there was a crosspiece to hold the legs together, and I was about eight or nine, and I would crawl under there with a pillow . . . ¶ The memory is worn smooth in the retelling, wrought perfect after all this time. How much time, 75 years? A little less. . . . *and my head would be directly underneath the loudspeaker, and it didn't make any difference, the sporting event. In those days there was only football really, no baseball, but I could be listening to Georgia–North Carolina, Texas-Alabama, and here's this kid in New York curled under a radio and somebody would score a touchdown . . .*

The delivery is run-on, of course, the broadcaster's trick for building drama, capturing the immediacy of the event. Punctuation is avoided, as if the slightest pause would give the listener enough excuse to tune away. . . . *and the crowd would go bananas and the roar would come down and it would just engulf me. It was like water out of a showerhead."*

The timbre remains refreshingly thin, though not fragile, the syrupy tenor as rich as ever, the cadences doing as much of the work as the actual vocabulary. How many generations have gone to sleep to that sugary soundtrack? Almost 60 years in a Dodgers radio booth, the last 50 in Los Angeles, starting in the Coliseum, but mostly in Chavez Ravine. Speaking of the Coliseum: Back in '58, when the Dodgers moved to Los Angeles and had to play in that converted football stadium, anyone sitting 80, maybe 90 rows from the field couldn't tell the difference between a squeeze bunt and a grand slam. The transistor radio had just been invented, so fans could summon that soothing voice, and it would issue from thousands of little speakers, aisle to aisle, foul pole to foul pole, an odd and reverberating ambience that became a given. Just part of living in the Southland, echoing here and there, from the valleys to the beach even, like the sound of surf, or something.

COURTESY OF LA DODGERS

ONE-MAN SHOW Scully (inset, with Dodgers owner Walter O'Malley) is an eloquent storyteller, but his silence at crucial moments speaks volumes.

In a city that is predicated on transience, that celebrates change so famously, there is little room for local institutions. Who would want to do something, the same one thing, for half a century? Somebody without ambition, that's who. Or without the talent to skip town altogether and go national. There is no patience for the parochial, the small-time, the stay-in-place, not in Los Angeles. If the Brown Derby had really meant to last, it would have franchised.

But here's Vin Scully, age 80, at least one more year on his contract, as suspiciously carrot-topped as the day in 1949 that Red Barber discovered him ("Red Skelton just called," Vin's somewhat excitable Irish mom told him), still calling games (most of them, anyway), not just a comforting presence or a relic but a professional reassurance, always finding the lyric to the singsong music of the night. It's gotten to the point, the man having stitched together all those seasons, all by himself, that when you say *Dodgers*, you really mean *Vin Scully*. Who else? Gary Sheffield? Not even Sandy Koufax.

How do you explain this endurance, this identification? He can't, won't. "I haven't done anything," he says, drawing the distinction (which many of his colleagues ignore) between the principals and himself. "I'm just sitting there." He's gotten this far without so much as a catchphrase; often he has disappeared from the action entirely. His first big call was Game 7 of the 1955

World Series, lefty Johnny Podres beating the New York Yankees. "Reese throwing to Hodges," he intoned. "Ladies and gentlemen, the Brooklyn Dodgers are the champions of the world." A long silence followed, lest he break down crying on air. (He was young then, and these boys were his boys.) Subsequent silences, for which he has become well-known, have been more purposeful, less emotional. "To this day," he says, "what I've always tried to do is call the play as quickly as I can, and then shut up, not only for the benefit of the listener but for my own joy of hearing the crowd roar." After Hank Aaron's historic blast in '74, he said, "It is gone," and simply let that roar wash, coast to coast, an aural vacuum other announcers would have found unforgivable. The moment didn't require comment.

SOMEONE WAS smart enough to transcribe Scully's ninth-inning call of Koufax's perfect game in 1965—just an example—in all its press-box poetry. Every paragraph is seeded with drama ("A lot of people in the ballpark are starting to see the pitches with their hearts"), bringing you to the edge of your seat ("He is one out away from the promised land, and Harvey Kuenn is coming up"). It was literature, all right, miraculously appropriate to the moment. ("Swung on and missed, strike two! It is 9:46 p.m.") Someone clocked him, too; he remained silent for 38 seconds after Kuenn fanned for the final out.

Of course, that wasn't the only humdinger. There was Kirk Gibson's shambling pinch-hit appearance in the opener of the 1988 World Series, set up when Scully ordered the NBC cameras to pan the Dodgers' dugout before the bottom of the ninth. ("Well, the man who's been there for the Dodgers all season, Kirk Gibson, is not in the dugout and will not be there for them tonight.") Gibson, iced up in the clubhouse, suddenly inflamed, and you know what happens next. After the game, Scully went down to then owner Peter O'Malley's box and realized all he could do was pace, goose-bumped.

But baseball being what it is, there have been astonishing stretches of tedium between humdingers, and this is the time that Scully, no color man for him, reveals his genius. He has been mocked, playfully, for his on-air erudition, lobbing some show-tune verse, a bit of Shakespeare, a fact so hopelessly irrelevant that you can almost see the fans in Dodger Stadium, earbuds in place, craning to look up into his booth: *What the hell?*

Seeing a rather remarkable hairdo, recently, he welcomed the player into the game like this: "What, ho! What, ho! What men are these, who wear their sideburns like parentheses?" That, like the Koufax call, off the top of his head. Occasionally, though, you can hear the clunk of the ol' Internet search engine—he has always been an early adopter when it comes to technology, going back to his college days, when he had a personal telegrapher as a stringer for *The New York Times*—explaining that a 6' 11" reliever is not actually the tallest man who ever lived, but that Robert Wadlow, at 8' 11", was, and that he died of an infection and his coffin was pretty damn big. He's just filling time, amusing himself. "Two balls, two strikes, two outs, bottom of the ninth."

Scully has made a life for himself, and for some millions of listeners, exploring the tension between the mundane and the heroic, maintaining a dignified presence all the while, no rooting for him, no consorting with players, knowing just what to say and when to shut up. In his mind, he's the host who welcomes you to the party, takes your coat, makes introductions and then stands apart to moderate the chatter. It's his voice alone that's been floating out over this impossible sprawl, 50 years, gathering everyone under the net, a couple of hours a night, enforcing a community of shared excitement, or puzzlement, or disappointment, Azusa to Temecula.

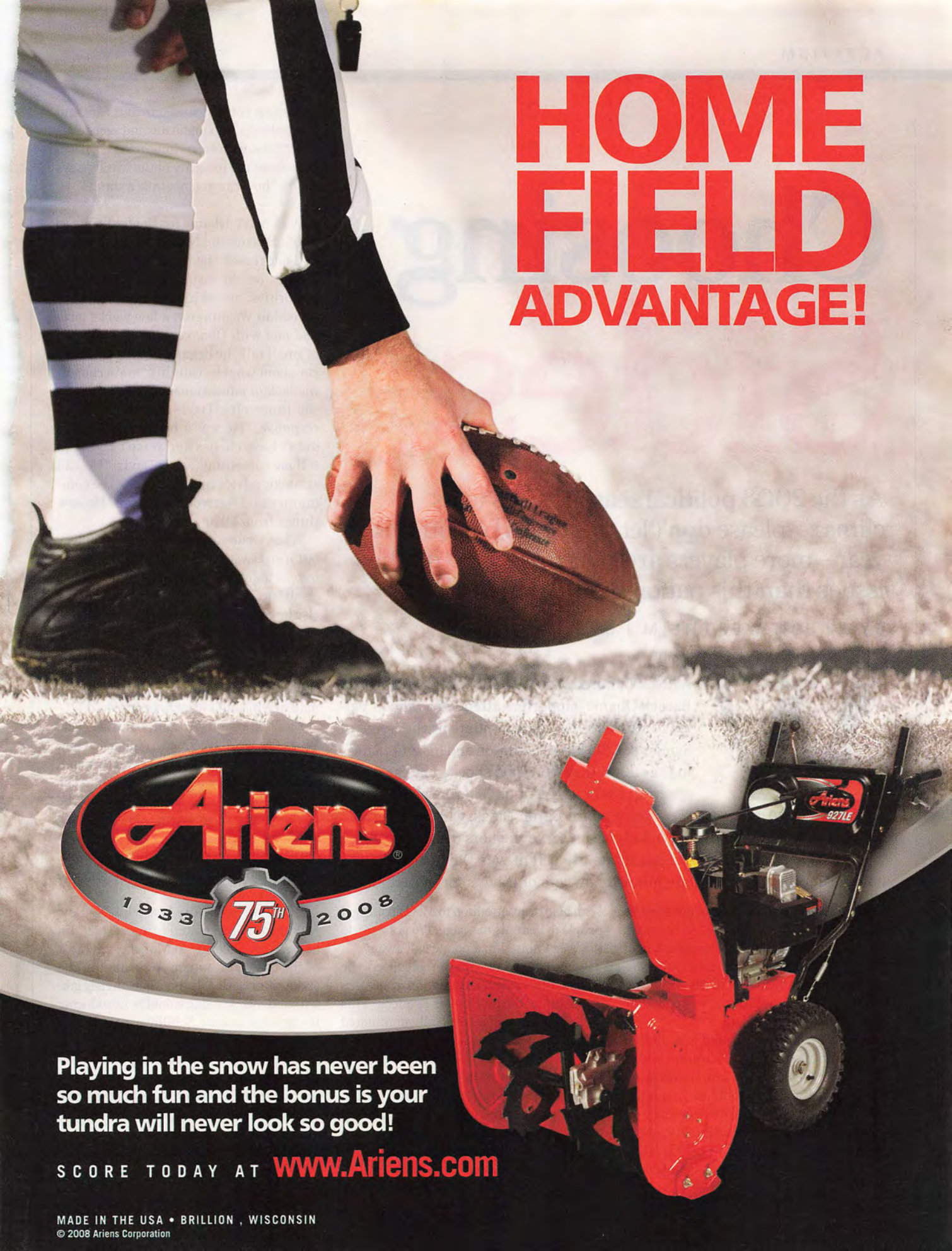
Several years ago Scully, who admits to an Irish introspection, found himself in a hotel room in Cincinnati and suddenly heard a clock ticking—he has 18 grandchildren, for God's sake—and asked for, and got, his schedule reduced by half of the U.S. He only works west of the Rockies. In any case, he's not a baseball fan particularly and doesn't miss the games. He's sat in the stands just once, and that was at an owner's invitation. It occurred to him long ago that the players come and go. The last one he formed an attachment with was Ralph Branca, only because Scully could fill out a hand on a series of double dates, and look what happened there. Shot heard 'round the world.

Still, he remains vulnerable to goose bumps. When the Dodgers made news in late July, obtaining Manny Ramirez, Scully was properly blasé, saying, "I'm not jumping in the air." He didn't expect Ramirez to be a Dodgers fixture, wouldn't do 50 years, that's for sure. On the other hand: the cars circling the stadium, another balmy night in the offering, and who knows what might happen? "Nothing like the bottom of the ninth, tying run on base, Manny in the on-deck circle," he says, as if the thought had just struck him, invigorated now. "Imagine the roar." □

BROOKLYN ROOTS Torre, who grew up listening to Scully call da Bums' games, was introduced as the new skipper by Vin.

PAUL BUCK/EPA

Seeing a remarkable hairdo, Scully says, "WHAT, HO! WHAT, HO! What men are these, who wear their sideburns like parentheses?"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Choosing Sides

As the 2008 political season heads to its climax—please don't let there be a playoff this year—more players are taking a stand on the issues than this nation has seen in decades

BY L. JON WERTHEIM | *Illustrations by* Gluekit

WHEN A hundred or so well-connected, well-heeled Barack Obama supporters attended a Silicon Valley fund-raiser for the candidate at the home of Symantec CEO John Thompson and his wife, Sandi, in June 2007, they were a bit shocked by the figure greeting them at the door. There was the smiling face of Los Angeles Clippers point guard Baron Davis, who later emceed the event and did everything that night but serve the hors d'oeuvres. When it came time to introduce the candidate himself, it was Davis who did the honors, not the hosts, who are minority owners of Davis's former team, the Golden State Warriors. Before handing the microphone over to Obama, Davis bellowed, "Without further ado, the next president of the United States!" and presented to the candidate a Warriors jersey with OBAMA 08 on the back. "That," says Davis, "was definitely one of the highlights of my life."

A coast away, Boston Red Sox pitcher Curt Schilling has taken a similarly active role supporting John McCain. He has taped a series of ads for the Republican nominee, and he has touted McCain's candidacy on his popular blog, 38pitches.com. "If you vote for someone just because a celebrity does, you're an idiot," he says. "At the same time, if I can help draw attention to McCain and get people to hear his message, I'm going to do that. He knows I'm a phone call away."

Last Thursday, Obama accepted the Democratic party's nomination at Invesco Field, home of the Denver Broncos. This week McCain will be officially nominated by the Republicans at St. Paul's Xcel Energy Center, the arena for the NHL's Minnesota Wild. And this is fitting. Galvanized largely by the presidential election, the intersection between sports and politics is increasingly busy. After years of collective apathy, athletes across sports, from stars to scrubs, are speaking out on issues and social causes, endorsing not just sneakers and cars and sports drinks, but candidates and agendas as well. "Now, with everything going on, if you care about the integrity of the world," says Davis, "how can you not take a stand?"

DAVIS MET Obama for the first time in 2006. During the NBA off-season Davis had addressed the Congressional Black Caucus on the issue of health care for minorities, one of his pet causes. He returned to Washington a few weeks later and met with Obama. After a minimum of small talk, he began bending Obama's ear about what he calls his "main cause": the lack of educational opportunities in the inner city. Davis recalls Obama's response. "He was a human being who didn't have clichés and wasn't trying to sell me something," says Davis. "He had strategic advice for me: Engage the community and use your platform. He saw things from all angles."

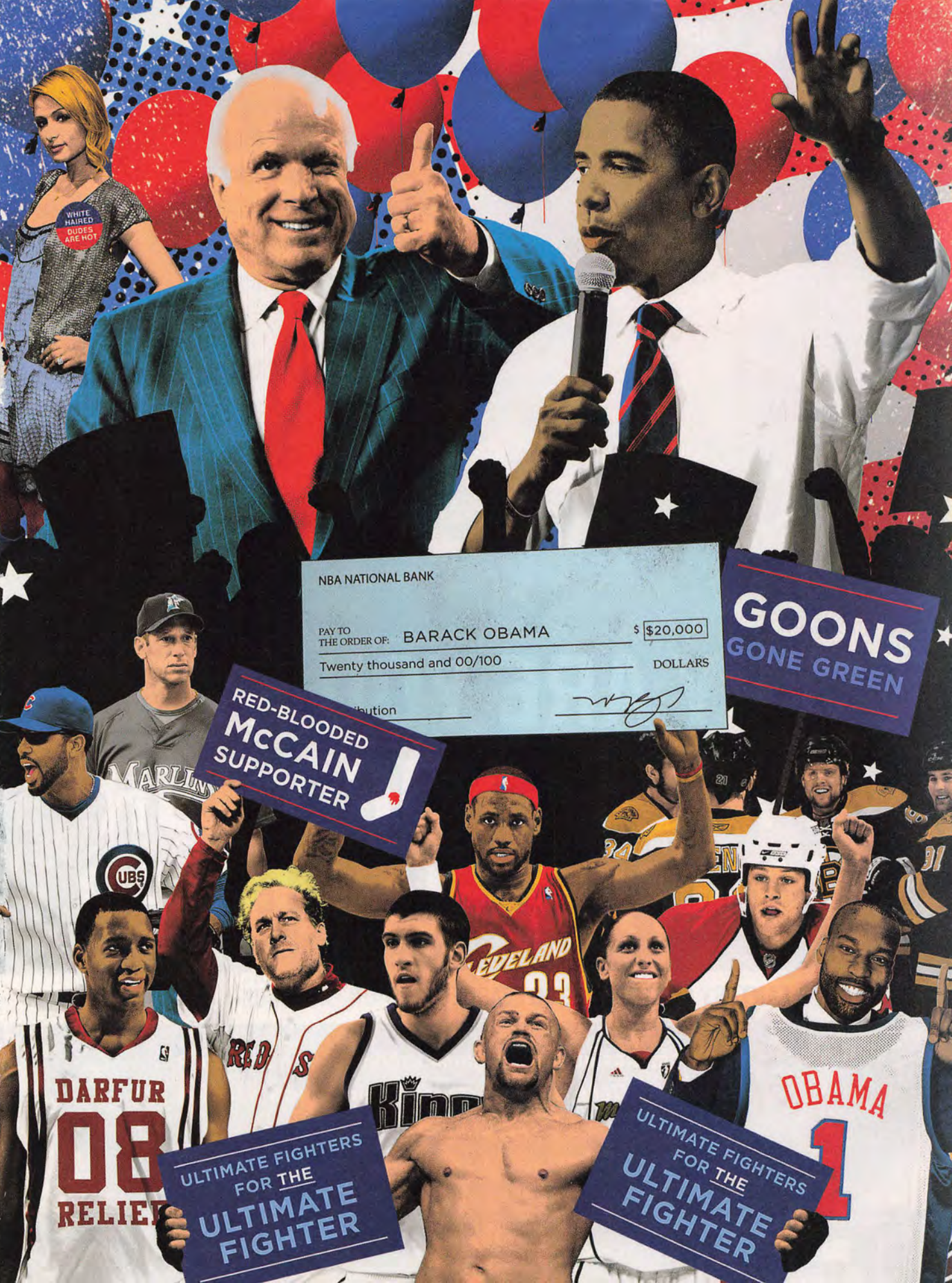
When Obama announced his candidacy last year, Davis wrote a check for $2,300, the max an individual may contribute to a single candidate. He then asked the campaign what else he could do to help, and that led to his fund-raising activity. "You know how, as an athlete, you want to be in the game, not on the bench or the sidelines?" says Davis, who signed with the Clippers in July. "I want my man to win, and I want to be involved."

Schilling's ties to McCain go further back. When the McCain campaign contacted him about, well, shilling for the Arizona senator, the decision was really no decision at all. The two have been friends since 2000, when the pitcher joined the Arizona Diamondbacks, and have worked together on issues pertaining to veterans' benefits and melanoma. (McCain and Schilling's wife, Shonda, are both skin-cancer survivors.)

A few weeks before last winter's New Hampshire presidential primary, McCain held a town meeting in Manchester. Most of the crowd of 300 or so thronging the auditorium of a local school had already gotten wind that Schilling would be introducing the Arizona senator. Schilling spoke briefly and gave the obligatory intro: "Now I will turn it over to the next president of the United States!" McCain appeared on stage, and the two men exchanged some lighthearted, sports-themed yucks. But it was what came next that astonished the crowd.

Instead of surrendering the microphone, Schilling stayed on the stage with McCain

GETTY IMAGES (HILTON, DAVIS, BRUINS); ALLEN KEE/WIREIMAGE (MCCAIN); STEVE HELBER/AP (OBAMA); DAVID DUROCHIK/SPORTSPICS (LEE); KIRBY LEE/US PRESSWIRE (GONZALEZ); DAMIAN STROHMEYER (JAMES); HEINZ KLUETMEIER (MCGRADY); JOHN BIEVER (SCHILLING); GREG ASHMAN/CSM (HAWES); PAUL CONNORS/AP (TAURASI); RICHARD WOLOWICZ/ICON SMI (EAGER); JOSHUA HEDGES/ZUFFA (LIDDELL)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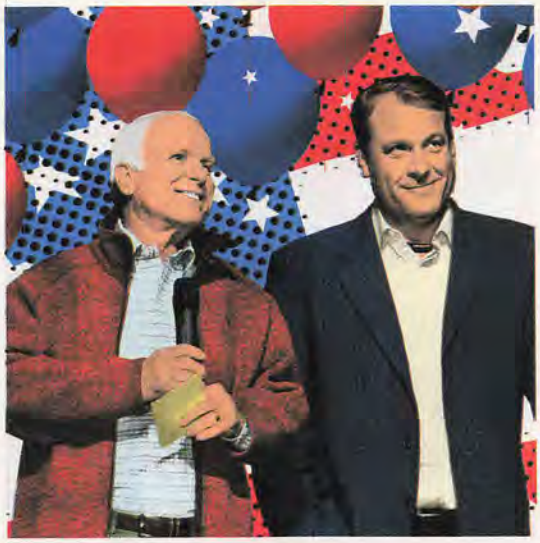
and took questions from the audience. For upward of an hour, the pitcher and the candidate addressed topics ranging from health care to the war in Iraq to curbing America's reliance on foreign oil. Recently Schilling expanded on his reasons for supporting McCain: "First and foremost, he's a quality human being. [I'm] a military brat, [so] his service to the country is a big deal to me. Unfortunately I think it's less of a priority for a lot of people nowadays, but I think it matters.... He's accountable. He's experienced. He's going to be the same person in the Oval Office as the person I voted for."

LIKE DAVIS and Schilling, an increasing number of athletes are endorsing presidential candidates and speaking out on issues. Ultimate Fighting Championship star Chuck Liddell supports McCain, while Detroit Pistons guard Chauncey Billups introduced Obama at a rally this summer. Milwaukee Brewers pitcher Jeff Suppan, a pious Catholic, has actively protested embryonic stem cell research. NBA journeyman Ira Newble, the son of a civil rights activist, traveled to Africa to call attention to the humanitarian crisis in Darfur. Houston Rockets forward Tracy McGrady also spent a week in Darfur during the 2007 off-season at the urging of teammate Dikembe Mutombo. McGrady was so moved by what he witnessed that he financed the forthcoming Darfur documentary, Not a Game, and has plans to establish a network of small schools in the refugee camps. (Joey Cheek, the gold-medal-winning speedskater at the 2006 Turin Games, would have attended the Beijing Games as a Darfur activist had the Chinese government not revoked his visa at the last minute.)



BRIAN SNYDER/REUTERS

No longer is politics the conversational equivalent of a no-fly zone. Says Martina Navratilova, a first-team athlete-activist, "It's like athletes have woken up to what actors and musicians have known forever: I have this amazing platform—why not use it?"

Let's be clear: This generation of jocks will never be confused with their predecessors in the 1960s and '70s, who risked going to jail by refusing to fight in the Vietnam War (Muhammad Ali), stood on the Olympic medal platform lifting black-gloved fists of protest (Tommie Smith and John Carlos) and admitted having had an abortion when publicly supporting the *Roe* v. *Wade* decision (Billie Jean King). But today's athletes have come a long way from the political indifference of the '80s and '90s, an era characterized not by raised fists but by open palms. That period was perhaps best defined by Michael Jordan's famously declining to support Harvey Gantt, an African-American Democrat running for a Senate seat against archconservative Jesse Helms in Jordan's home state of North Carolina, saying, "Republicans buy shoes, too." Compare that declaration to the statement of Davis, who says when he was told "the more I spoke out about politics, the more I would turn corporate sponsors off," responded, "Who gives a s---?"

"Our issues aren't as overt [as in the '60s and '70s]," says Orlando Magic center Adonal Foyle. "You don't see blatant racism and dogs gnawing at people and fire hoses. The politics are more subtle. But, trust me, we're discussing the same issues—the election, Reverend Wright, the war in Iraq, the economy—as everyone else.... I think [athletes] are definitely getting more engaged."

Foyle, in fact, may be the standard-bearer for athletes who can leave a mark in ways other than winning titles. A native of St. Vincent and the Grenadines in the Caribbean, Foyle attended Colgate, where he was struck by the level of political indifference on campus and in the United States. A history major, Foyle diagnosed the cause: money. "Young people were feeling that politics didn't represent them," he says. "It was all about the big donors. There was a feeling that a small minority of the wealthy and corporate interests were making the decisions."

Foyle joined the NBA in 1997 and four years later founded Democracy Matters, a nonprofit, nonpartisan group that, according to its mission statement, "works to get big private money out of politics and people back in." Today, there are Democracy Matters chapters on some 70 college campuses, and, as he has for most of his NBA career, Foyle spent much of this off-season extolling the virtues of publicly financed elections and teaching college kids about grassroots organizing and writing petitions.

Because his organizational is nonpartisan, Foyle is reluctant to endorse either Obama or McCain. But an uncommonly large number of athletes are happy to throw their weight behind a candidate. For instance, Sacramento Kings forward Spencer Hawes is a McCain man. Hawes's car is adorned with a bumper sticker declaring GOD BLESS GEORGE W. BUSH—"There's nail marks where people have tried to scrape it off," he says—and he started a Facebook group for fellow devotees of the conservative pundit Ann Coulter. Florida Marlins first baseman Luis Gonzalez is a McCain supporter. So is San Diego Chargers coach Norv Turner.

According to public campaign finance records, Phoenix Mercury guard Diana Taurasi, Chicago Cubs first baseman Derrek Lee and Chicago Blackhawks leftwinger (in a hockey sense) Ben Eager are among the athletes who have contributed to Obama's campaign. "If we're going to talk about athletes getting involved in politics and social causes, and using their celebrity and how that's on the rise," says Peter Dreier, a politics professor at Occidental College,

"If I CAN HELP," says Schilling, "McCain knows I'm a phone call away."

"you can't ignore the impact of Obama."

In particular, it would be naive to ignore the issue of race. It stands to reason that Obama would find favor in a workforce disproportionately represented by African-Americans. And never mind that Obama's brother-in-law, Craig Robinson, is the basketball coach at Oregon State. You'd be hard-pressed to name another candidate who's spent more photo ops shooting jumpers and talking sports. Rick Wade, a senior adviser to Obama, claims that courting the support of athletes has been a specific campaign strategy. As Obama tells SI, "I appreciate all these athletes, as they have a unique ability to reach out to people who might not normally engage in politics." (The McCain press office did not respond to repeated interview requests for this story.)

HOW DO athletes vote? When former players enter politics after their careers end, Dreier says, there's a virtual 50-50 split between Democrats and Republicans. That is, for every Senator Jim Bunning (R., Ky.) there's a former Senator Bill Bradley (D., N.J.); for every Congressman Heath Shuler (D., N.C.) there's a Congressman Steve Largent (R., Okla.) And traditional stereotypes don't necessarily hold. For all the athletes who grew up with left-leaning parents or benefiting from liberal social programs, many end up gravitating to the right. As agent Leigh Steinberg puts it, "You know the joke: The definition of a conservative is a liberal who just saw the withholding from his bonus check."

Joke or not, it's no coincidence that the decline of athletes' activism coincided with the rise of big money, both from contracts and endorsement opportunities. As Jordan articulated, the athlete who adopts a cause risks alienating a block of consumers. Last season Newble wrote an open letter to the Chinese government condemning China for its role in the Darfur crisis and asked his Cleveland Cavaliers teammates to join him in signing it. While most did, LeBron James refused, claiming that he was insufficiently informed on the issues to take a stand, many suspected that, in fact, his off-court income, particularly from Nike, drove his decision. Likewise, while James has reportedly contributed $20,000 to a committee devoted to electing Obama, he has thus far declined the campaign's invitation to make a public endorsement.

Navratilova thinks that today's players are able to exist in a jock cocoon, insulated from issues affecting society at large. "Muhammad Ali was an activist [in part] because he got drafted," she says. "If [some of today's athletes] got shipped to Iraq, I guarantee we'd hear them speak up."

But for those who long for more political involvement from their sports idols, they might want to be careful what they wish for. Former slugger Kirk Gibson, now a Diamondbacks coach, warns, "Just because you're a great athlete doesn't mean you know what you're talking about."

ATHLETES' ACTIVISM also can come cloaked in colors other than blue and red. Green, for instance. Throughout his eight-year NHL career, Boston Bruins defenseman Andrew Ference has considered himself a practicing environmentalist. When the weather permits, he leaves his hybrid car at home and bikes to games. He composts. "Pretty much go down the list, and I try to do it in my personal life," he says.

Two years ago, Ference, then with the Calgary Flames, became friendly with David Suzuki, the Wayne Gretzky of Canadian environmentalism. As they talked, Ference became aware of the adverse relationship between pro sports and the planet's health. Ference and Suzuki figured out that, with air travel, bus travel and hotel stays, NHL players are responsible for about 50% more carbon emissions than the average North American.

Ference's idea: He encouraged his teammates to go "carbon-neutral," investing in carbon offsets to nullify the players' harmful impact on the environment. It started as a modest program, but after most of Ference's teammates signed on, he took it leaguewide. Now more than 500 pro hockey players have pledged to go carbon-neutral. Teams have contacted Ference about "greening their arenas." The Phoenix Coyotes, for instance, recently began using biodegradable utensils at their concession stands. Even businesses outside of hockey have contacted him about becoming more environmentally conscious. "Usually it's the teams or sponsors urging the players to do more," says Ference. "Hopefully fans see a program like this, think about the issues and try to do more in their personal lives. It's not changing the world, but it's a start."

Ference has taken some occasional grief for his work. He tells the story of having an on-ice fight with another player. In between punches, his opponent snarled, "Why don't you go save the f------ world?"

In the end, Ference says, who cares? "We're showing that we care about something bigger than the size of our cars or how fast our sports cars are. . . . To me it's pretty simple: When you're a professional athlete and people look up to you, you have a responsibility to represent something." □

COURTESY OF BARON DAVIS

"With all that's going on, how can you NOT take a stand?" says Davis.

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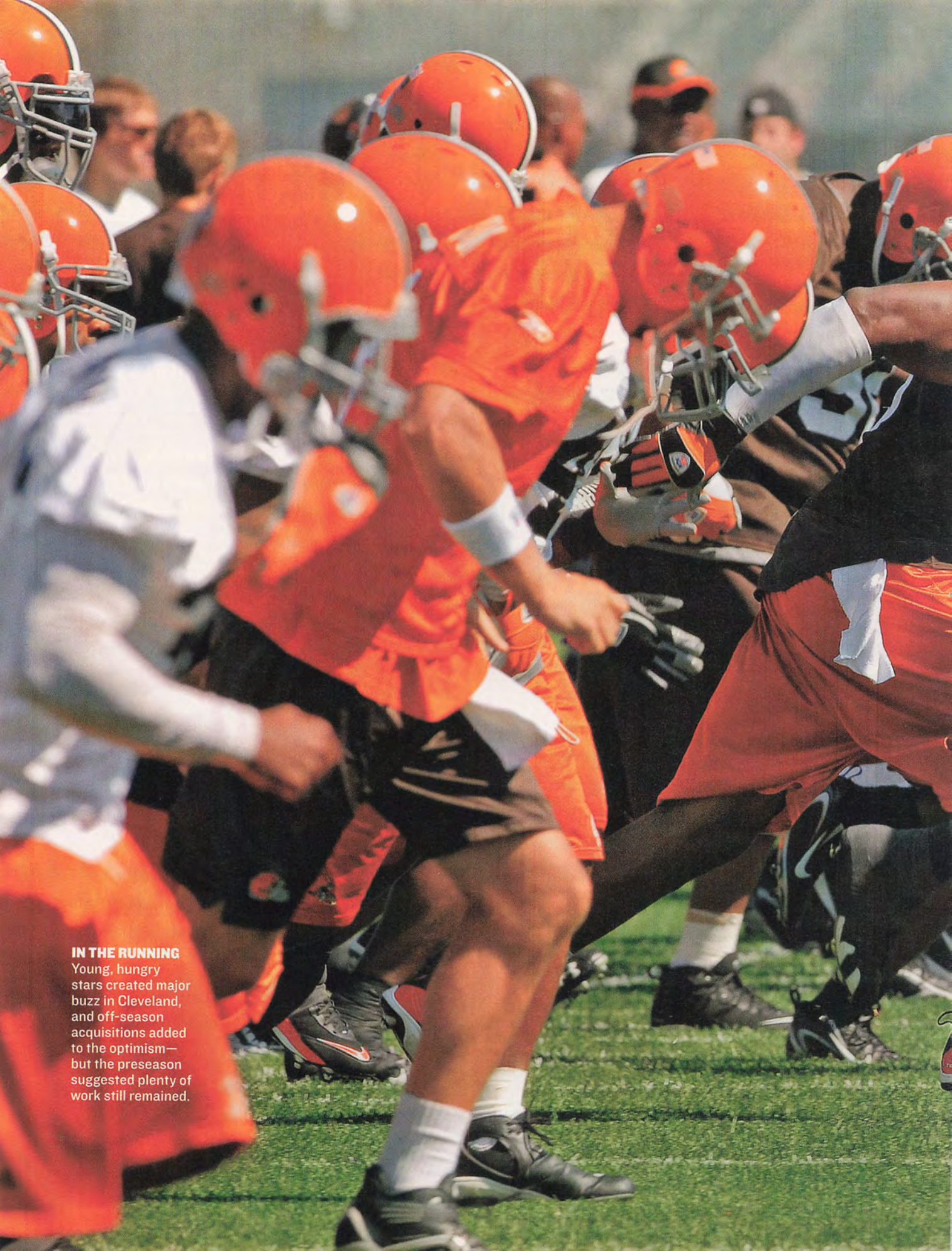
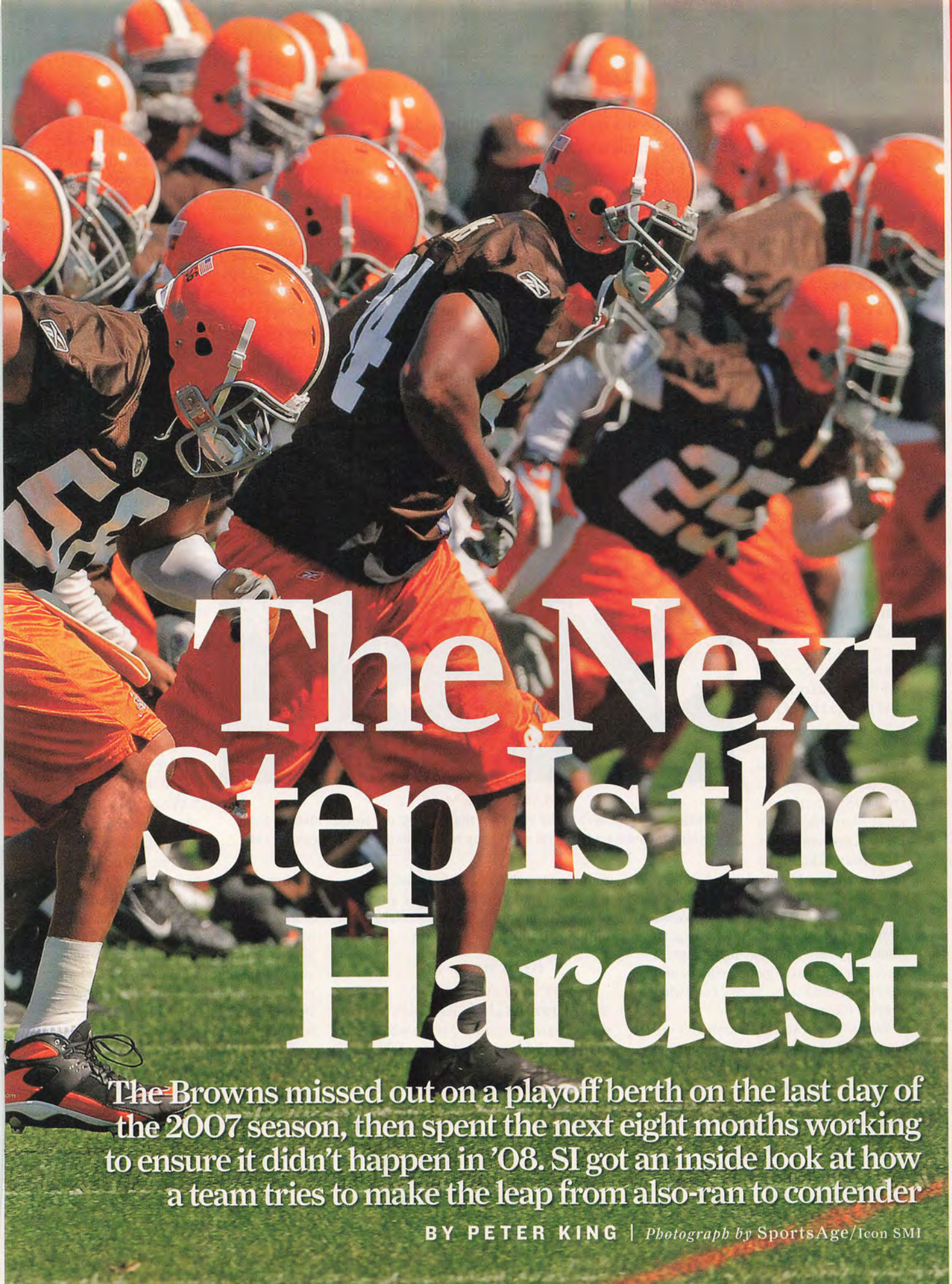


IN THE RUNNING
Young, hungry stars created major buzz in Cleveland, and off-season acquisitions added to the optimism—but the preseason suggested plenty of work still remained.



The Next Step Is the Hardest

The Browns missed out on a playoff berth on the last day of the 2007 season, then spent the next eight months working to ensure it didn't happen in '08. SI got an inside look at how a team tries to make the leap from also-ran to contender

BY PETER KING | *Photograph by* SportsAge/Icon SMI

IT'S A blustery mid-May day in downtown Cleveland, a day that has a football feel to it—which, for Cleveland, can be any of 365 days a year. This is Browns Town. And this afternoon at Public Square, there's the added attraction of Braylon Edwards, the star wide receiver, who is shooting a team promo in his number 17 home jersey . . . until a well-dressed man, maybe 25, walks into camera range. ¶ "Dude!" Edwards cries out. "We're filming!" ¶ "Sorry, sorry," says the dude. "I just had to tell you, *This is our year!*" ¶ Maybe. Cleveland shocked the NFL by winning 10 games in 2007, but as Bill Parcells tells every team he's ever coached or run, "You never pick up where you left off last year." Of the 14 teams that have gone to the Super Bowl between 2000 and '06, for instance, nine failed to even make the playoffs the next season. ¶ But as the Browns enter season 10 of their return to the NFL, it's the first time fans have justifiable playoff expectations. This isn't to be confused with expansion giddiness or misplaced hope after what turned out to be bad drafts and poorly spent free-agent millions. This is hope founded on Cleveland's explosive offense, which scored 25 points a game last year, and young stars such as Edwards, who set the franchise record with 16 touchdown receptions, and general manager Phil Savage's two big February trades that plugged holes in a leaky defense.

The TV networks noticed, giving Cleveland five prime-time games in 2008. That's one more than the Super Bowl–champion Giants. "I've been waiting to play on *Monday Night Football* my whole life," says Edwards. "I've been waiting to look into the camera and say, 'Braylon Edwards, University of Michigan.' And we've got a Madden game—a Sunday-night game! I can't wait to TiVo the game, go home and hear John Madden say, '*Boom!* Look what Braylon Edwards did!' "

Yes, Edwards and his teammates are on unfamiliar turf. Last year was just the second winning NFL season in Cleveland since 1994. So SI kept close tabs on the Browns from last December, when they lost out on a playoff berth, to the final preparations for their 2008 season, which begins on Sunday with a national-TV game against the NFC powerhouse Cowboys. Some of the optimism surrounding the club is well-founded, some is built on shaky ground. This is a story of how a longtime NFL doormat tries to build itself into a playoff team.

MAN IN THE MIDDLE

Savage, the G.M., was at the center of the Browns' off-season maneuvering, which focused primarily on shoring up his team's defensive weaknesses.

DECEMBER 30
AVON LAKE, OHIO

THREE HOURS after Cleveland's 2007 season ended with a 20–7 home win over the 49ers, Edwards tried to avoid the 30 family members and friends who filled his house. He wasn't thinking about that day's victory, which gave the Browns a 10–6 final record, but about the game seven days earlier: Bengals 19, Browns 14. Derek Anderson threw four interceptions that day, and on a third-quarter play that would haunt the Cleveland quarterback for months, he checked down to a safer option and missed a wide-open Edwards in the end zone. The receiver verbally sparred with Anderson on the sideline afterward.

Now, as Edwards shot pool, the Titans were beating the Colts on a TV in the background. Tennessee's victory would give it a 10–6 record and the final AFC playoff spot, by virtue of a tiebreaker over the Browns. All Edwards could think about was how Cleveland had bungled the Cincinnati game. "We didn't deserve it, but the Titans in the playoffs?" he said. "Tampa Bay? The Redskins! You can't tell me we couldn't beat the damn Redskins."

Throughout the Cleveland area other Browns players and staffers clicked off their televisions in disgust. Edwards spoke for them all when he said, "I *do not* want to feel this way again the rest of my career."

JANUARY 9
BEREA, OHIO

SAVAGE, 43, is an obsessive note taker, scribbling his observations and thoughts during games and meetings, then later typing them into his office computer. At 5' 10½" and 160 pounds, he looks more like a former English major and small-college shortstop (which he was, at the University of the South) than a career football coach, scout and executive. He is, in fact, the quietly daring architect of the Browns, with complete authority over the 53-man roster he hands to coach Romeo Crennel in September. Savage loves his job, and his fingerprints are all over this team.

It was an important day, the start of the annual three-day organizational meetings at the team's training facility. Pro and college scouts, coaches and trainers gathered to assess the 2007 season and get Savage's vision of the future.

GREGORY SHAMUS/GETTY IMAGES

"It was a good season," he began. "We revamped the offensive staff, established an offensive identity. Now we have to avoid complacency. We have to finesse and manage our quarterback situation. I want to focus not only on Pittsburgh and Baltimore and Cincinnati in our division, but also on the rest of the AFC."

The G.M. laid out these priorities: re-sign power back Jamal Lewis; retain Anderson, a restricted free agent, while developing 2007 first-round draft pick Brady Quinn; and fix a defensive front that allowed 4.5 yards per rush in '07.

FEBRUARY 11

BEREA

CORNERBACK Leigh Bodden, a sixth-year vet, met with Savage and Crennel, looking for a new contract (he was due $4.47 million over the next two years) or a trade. Though losing Bodden would further weaken a poor secondary, the Browns didn't love him. Now they'd have a bargaining chip in any deal for a defensive lineman.

FEBRUARY 27

BEREA

RETURNING FROM the NFL combine in Indianapolis, where, in addition to sizing up draft prospects, he queried other G.M.'s about available veterans, Savage identified two defensive linemen he has targeted for Crennel's 3–4 scheme. Green Bay wanted a high draft choice for relatively unknown end Corey Williams, who's had two straight seven-sack seasons; Cleveland's mid-second-round pick would be enough to get him. Detroit's Shaun Rogers, a two-time Pro Bowl nosetackle, was on the block as well. The book on Rogers: plays great when he wants to; weight fluctuations between 355 and 395; smart guy with a reputation for being not totally committed to football. Browns staffers checked into Rogers and decided he was worth the risk. Savage thought he could get him for Bodden and a third- or fourth-round pick.

Cleveland didn't have a first-round pick, having used it in 2007 to trade up to draft Quinn. Yet this raffling of high draft picks was heresy to Savage. To be without a pick in the first three rounds scared him. To keep his picks and miss out on Williams and Rogers scared him too.

Savage convened his kitchen cabinet: Crennel, assistant head coach Rip Scherer, defensive coordinator Mel Tucker and offensive coordinator Rob Chudzinski, director of player personnel T.J. McCreight, pro personnel director Steve Sabo and cap analyst Trip MacCracken. "To make the Browns as good as we can be this year, we're going to have to sacrifice something—and it could be the draft," he told his staff. "If we could sign Derek Anderson and trade for Corey Williams and Shaun Rogers, would we be willing to get rid of Bodden and not draft till the fourth or fifth round?"

All eight men in the room said yes.

That night Savage offered Lions president Matt Millen a third-round pick and Bodden for Rogers.

FEBRUARY 28

BEREA

THE NEXT morning some of the Browns' brass were having second thoughts about the offer for Rogers. Millen had responded to Savage by saying he had other teams interested, but was that the sort of white lie G.M.'s told when they were trying to get more out of a deal? "Millen's bluffing," one of Savage's aides told him. Late in the day Savage called Millen to say he'd keep Bodden in the trade but wanted to switch to a lower draft choice.

"We had a deal!" said Millen, who was somewhere between angry and livid. "I won't do it for less than that."

Said Savage, "Let me sleep on it."

A restless night for Savage: It was as if half of his brain reminded him he had to have Rogers to fix a horrible run defense, and the other half told him a third-rounder and Bodden was too much to pay. (And besides, it seemed likely he would get Williams from Green Bay.) Such decisions define a G.M.'s career. By the time Savage went to sleep, he felt as if he were paying tricked-out Escalade money for a baseline SUV.

FEBRUARY 29

BEREA

ON HIS WAY to work, Savage called Millen. "It's too much for us," Savage said. "I think you're going to have to count us out." He hoped Millen's next words would be, "O.K., I'll take a fifth-rounder and Bodden." They weren't.

"Don't worry," Millen said brusquely. "I've got a deal with Cincinnati."

Savage's heart sank. *Cincinnati! We lost Rogers to a team in our division!*

Savage asked what the terms were.

"A three and a five," Millen said.

When Savage got to the office, he was despondent. And fuming. "Because we tried to get too cute, we not only lost this guy, but now we're going have to play him twice a year!" he told his staff.

But there was a hang-up in the Cincinnati deal over the $1 million bonus Rogers was owed on March 1. The Lions wanted Cincinnati to pay it, but the Bengals insisted that Rogers pass his physical first; the Browns had been willing to pay the bonus, no strings attached. At

MEN ON THE MARGINS

Hall (left), a 2008 seventh-round pick from tiny St. Augustine's College, shows pass-rush promise, and Wright is being counted on in a decimated secondary.

GREGORY SHAMUS/GETTY IMAGES (LEFT); AARON JOSEFCZYK/ICON SMI

3 p.m. the NFL said it would not allow the trade to go through unless there was a binding agreement on the bonus. The Bengals held firm, as did Millen. "If I'm paying him the million, he's playing for *us*," said Millen, who had another team, the Bills, waiting to trade third- and fifth-round picks for Rogers in case the Cincy deal blew up.

By then Savage was desperately trying to reach Millen. He left a cellphone message saying the Browns would accept the original terms: a three and Bodden for Rogers.

Millen returned the call. "Don't go back to Cincinnati," Savage said. "We'll do the deal right now." Millen said yes, and Rogers was a Brown.

By sunup the next day Savage had completed trades for Rogers and Williams—filling two big needs but also eradicating the top of Cleveland's draft—and signed Anderson to a three-year, $24 million deal that had $7 million in bonuses due over the last two years. (Lewis had been given a three-year extension on Feb. 21.) Thus, if the quarterback's 2007 season turns out to be a fluke, the Browns will be able to cut him after a year without taking a huge cap hit.

Now the question was, With some big holes still left on the depth chart, could Savage fill them with four low-round picks?

MARCH 17
ANN ARBOR, MICH.

OVER A St. Patrick's Day lunch at the Brown Jug, a University of Michigan campus hangout, Braylon Edwards, the former Wolverine, picked the brain of one of his off-season workout buddies: current Wolverine Michael Phelps. Swimming, Phelps told him, is the ultimate cardio workout. A light went on over Edwards's head: *You can't sprain an ankle in the pool. You can't wear down your joints.* Edwards quizzed Phelps on setting up a workout. "This is what I'll do to stay in shape between minicamp in June and training camp in July," Edwards said.

APRIL 23
LARGO, MD.

THIS WAS crazy. Instead of huddling with his scouts in Berea and massaging the draft board, Savage hopped a 10 a.m. flight to Baltimore, rented a car, drove 24 miles to Prince George's Community College, and shook hands with one of the most marginal prospects in the 2008 draft: outside linebacker Alex Hall of Division II St. Augustine's College, in North Carolina.

The draft was three days away, and here was Savage, looking at a player he might take in the seventh round or try to sign after the draft as a long-shot free agent. Why? Because he was panning for draft nuggets, and one of his scouts, 25-year-old Bobby Vega, assigned to small colleges in the East and South, told Savage this was his top prospect at any position. Savage had watched some video of Hall and seen speed and production (26 sacks in three seasons). But before committing a precious pick, he needed to see Hall in person.

Savage placed a football eight yards beyond a line of four cones and asked Hall to high-step, fast, over the cones to the ball. Hall ran, knees high, over the cones and, without being told, accelerated to the ball, scooped it up in full stride and ran back. The athleticism stunned Savage. Vega was right. Hall had a chance to fill a void, and he might last till the seventh round.

APRIL 26-27
BEREA

WITH NO pick on the first day of the draft, Savage jogged through his Bay Village neighborhood west of town. On Day 2 the Browns did not get a cornerback—every one they had listed on their draft board had been taken. But as Cleveland's final pick, No. 231 overall, approached, Savage called Hall at his Glenarden, Md., home and asked him if he had the TV on. Hall said yes. "Well, look at the bottom of the screen," Savage said. "You're going to see your name." In a moment Hall saw it. His family exploded in celebration. Hall said what all draft picks essentially say: "Now that they're giving me this opportunity, they'll never be able to get me out of there."

A TEST OF METTLE

After a rocky December marked by bad decisions in a Week 16 loss to the Bengals, Anderson must prove he can handle pressure and win the big games.

MAY 20
BEREA

THOUGH THE Browns were talking to a few teams about acquiring a corner, they were trying to convince themselves they'd be O.K. with a marginal crew of Brandon McDonald and Eric Wright as starters and Daven Holly as the nickel, none of whom had been in the league for more than three years. But during a seven-on-seven drill pitting receivers against corners, Edwards and Holly both went up high for a pass downfield, and their legs entangled. Edwards came down hard on his right leg, pain shooting through his hip. Holly came down hard on his left foot, buckling his knee.

MICHAEL J. LEBRECHT II/DEUCE3 PHOTOGRAPHY

Edwards got up. Holly stayed down. Within an hour Holly, 26, was lying in an MRI tube three miles away. This was his first major injury, and his mind was racing. *Will my speed be gone? My quickness? I'll come back. I won't come back. I'll be fine. I'll never be the same.* For 45 minutes he didn't know what to expect.

Then, in the exam room, team physician Tony Miniaci looked at the MRI and told Holly, "You do have some ligament damage. We'll have to operate." Holly's stomach hit the floor. He would miss the season.

Now what were the Browns going to do? With Tony Romo and Ben Roethlisberger (combined touchdown passes last year: 68) coming to town the first two weeks of the 2008 season, Cleveland had a crisis at cornerback. The Browns signed Terry Cousin, a veteran nickelback who had been released by Jacksonville. It was not how they wanted to go into the season.

JUNE 12
BEREA

THREE NEW additions impressed the Browns in spring workouts, which culminated in a full-squad minicamp.

Rogers looked good. The coaches, in fact, left for summer break somewhat giddy over him. He was willing to move from the knifing, pass-rushing tackle in the Lions' 4–3 to the noseman in Crennel's 3–4, occupying two blockers to free teammates to make plays. Still an enormous man with one of the biggest heads in NFL history (topped by a Mohawk), he was a good 30 pounds lighter than the player Crennel saw on 2007 video of the Lions. "I'm not going to lie," Rogers said. "I was too heavy last year. The first nine games, I was the Man. After that I got too heavy. I'm going back to being a force this year."

Wide receiver Donte' Stallworth, dreadlocks flowing from under his helmet, pleased the staff by returning from a family funeral on a red-eye at 6:30 this morning, just so he could have one day of practice with the first team. "I love the guy," Edwards said of the free-agent pickup. "Derek cannot overthrow him."

Hall, the seventh-rounder, ran around like a colt, often not knowing what to do but doing it frenetically. Once, Hall, wearing number 96, and third-year rush specialist Kamerion Wimbley, number 95, were attacking the passer at the same time. When scouts watched tape of the play later, one of them said, "If you didn't know Wimbley was 95 and Alex 96, it'd be hard to tell which was which."

BEEFING UP THE 3-4
Defensive line coach Randy Melvin worked new run-stuffers Rogers (92) and Williams (99) into the scheme along with rush specialist Wimbley (left).

JUNE 26
ANN ARBOR, MICH.

THANK YOU, Michael Phelps. In the second week of his pool workouts at Michigan, Edwards alternated track drills in the water—high-knee, hurdler motion mostly—with swimming laps. One day track, the next day freestyle; one day track, the next day breaststroke; one day track, the next day butterfly.

Edwards was sure this was taking his fitness to another level. So he and Phelps made a friendly wager. "For every gold you win in Beijing," Edwards told the Olympian, "I've got to score two touchdowns this year."

JULY 10
SCAPPOOSE, ORE.

IF ONLY IT were this easy in the NFL. Derek Anderson, in his postcard setting of a hometown, with Mount Hood looming to the east, is playing a game of team keep-away at the Derek Anderson Football Camp at Scappoose High. Kids running and jumping and cavorting; the NFL quarterback motioning and yelling, "Go deep!" to eight-year-olds, then airing it out and afterward signing autographs for every parent and child and hanger-on for an hour. "Derek's made for this," said his dad, Glenn, watching from the sideline.

But is he made for leading a team to the NFL playoffs? Drafted by the Ravens in the sixth round in 2005, the former Oregon State star has gone from being a Baltimore practice-squadder to going on waivers to fighting for a spot on the Browns roster to being Cleveland's surprise starter. In '07 only four quarterbacks threw more touchdown passes than his 29; only eight had more passing yards than his 3,787. In the off-season Scherer, the assistant head coach, worked hard on getting Anderson to look to his left rather than immediately locking onto the receivers on his right. Watching 2007 game tape, Scherer grilled Anderson whenever the passer made a mistake.

At a restaurant across from Scappoose High, Anderson settled into a side table and talked about the mistake he can't forget, that Week 16 pass against the Bengals. It was early in the third quarter, and the Browns trailed 19–0 with third-and-seven at the Cincinnati 20. Edwards ran a post-corner route, sprinting on a diagonal to the goalpost, then cutting to the corner of the end zone. Anderson was supposed to wait for Edwards to come open, but when the corner went in front of the receiver, Anderson, instead of giving Edwards

MICHAEL J. LEBRECHT II/IDEUCE3 PHOTOGRAPHY

one more split second to get free, checked down and threw to Joe Jurevicius at the nine. That was enough for a first down, but Edwards, who ended up running free in the end zone, was miffed.

"Next play I threw an interception in the back of the end zone," Anderson said. "Instead of throwing the TD and we're back in it, we're still way down. I kill myself for that throw to this day."

The following week against the 49ers, Savage wrote this note to himself as he watched Anderson in the Browns' last game of the season: *3's a little shaky, not as confident.* The five games in December came down like a hammer on Anderson, who had a 53.1% completion rate, seven touchdowns and eight interceptions that month. Though it appears the players and coaches and front office are very happy to have their passer back this year, Anderson has to overcome that mediocre December and finish the season strong to convince people he's a long-term, winning NFL quarterback. "Last year we just came out swinging and established an identity," Edwards said of the offense. "This is the year we see if Derek makes the passes under pressure and on *Monday Night Football*."

STAGE FRIGHT

The Browns have five national TV games this year but hardly looked ready for prime time in a poor preseason performance against Hixon's Giants.

It's only Cleveland's season that rides on Anderson. "We've got to validate what we did last year," he says. "I've got to play football the way I know how. I can't play timid."

JULY 23
BEREA

"FELLAS, YOU haven't done anything yet," Crennel told his players at the start of training camp. "You haven't won a division. You haven't made the playoffs. Before you buy into all this hype about how great you are, just remember this: You've got five national-TV games this year. If you fail, they'll tear you down faster than they've built you up."

Twenty-five hundred fans showed up for the first workout. Four minutes in, a chant arose that told the Browns all they needed to know about those fans' expectations: "Su-per Bowl! Su-per Bowl!"

"This could be a special year," said former NFL great Jim Brown, 72, a team adviser, who watched practice from a golf cart. "I love this team. I love being back here to share the adventure."

The first reviews were upbeat. Rogers weighed in at 359 and spent part of the afternoon practice overpowering the middle of the offensive line. Williams, at left end, showed more quickness in pads than the coaches thought he had. Wimbley, whom Tucker had been working with, exploded off the line. Anderson's primary weapons—Edwards, Stallworth, Lewis, tight end Kellen Winslow—were all together for only the second day since the 2007 season ended, and Winslow, angling for a new contract, looked fast and powerful coming off the line as a tight end or a slot receiver.

At dinner that night Savage was beaming. "When camp opened three years ago I put on a happy face but knew we'd get our teeth kicked in," he said. "Two years ago the big free agent we signed, LeCharles Bentley, went down for the year on the first play of training camp, and it was like pulling a piece of thread on a cheap suit. Last year it was the drumbeat of whether Romeo would [last through the season as coach]. This year what I'm concerned about is not getting our players hurt before our first game. We can compete."

AUGUST 5
BEREA

IS THERE NO end to the bad news for the secondary? The Browns learned that cornerback Gary Baxter, the big-money 2005 free agent who was to come back from double knee surgery 22 months ago, needed another operation, this one arthroscopic. The Browns prepared to waive him. "Heartbreaking," Savage said. Baxter was a beacon of hope in his bid to return from having shredded the patella tendons in each knee on a play in Week 6 of 2006. His new injury and pending surgery turned the atmosphere at camp funereal.

But the show must go on, and one of the corners scheduled to start, Wright, was at least talking a good game. "I hope teams want to come after us," he said. "We'll be ready."

Oh, teams will be coming after Wright and McDonald. Rapidly, however, the safety net under them was disappearing.

AUGUST 16
BEREA

ANOTHER LATE night for Edwards, who was captivated by the swimming in Beijing. The previous night, he had left a screaming message for Phelps after his friend won the 100-meter butterfly by a fingertip for his seventh gold medal. On this night, near midnight, Phelps called Edwards from Beijing soon after he won his final gold medal and reminded him of their bet. "I got eight," Phelps said, "so that means you've got to get 16 touchdowns this year."

"News flash," Edwards said. "I did that last year. I'll give you 17."

RICH KANE/US PRESSWIRE

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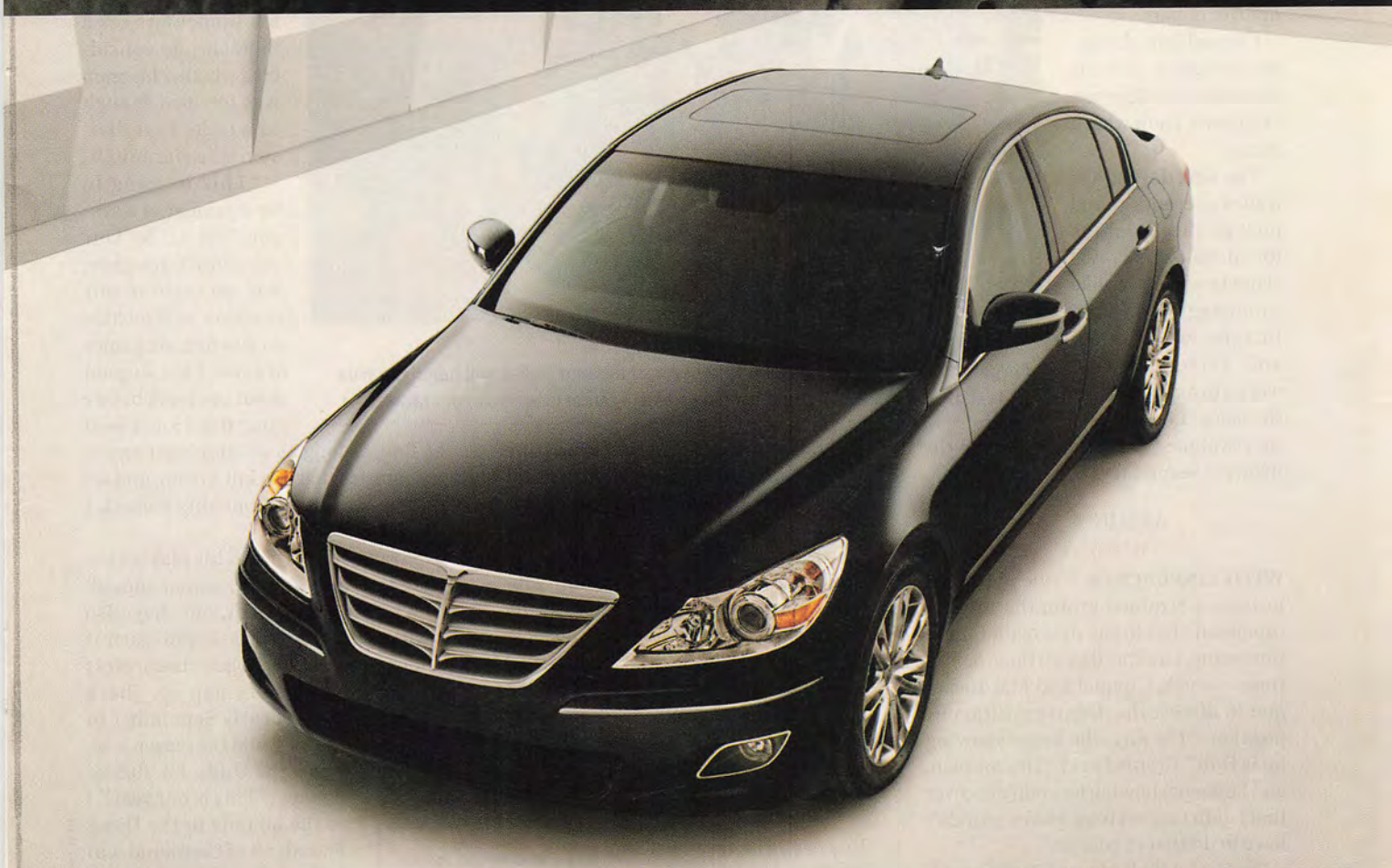

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AUGUST 18

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J.

"My God," Ron Jaworski, the ESPN analyst working the Giants-Browns preseason telecast, said during a first-half commercial break. "We've got these guys [on Monday night] three times this year!" He was reacting to what he had seen in the first 17 minutes: Wright had been beaten badly twice by the less-than-immortal Domenik Hixon; Anderson had flubbed a goal line handoff to Lewis that the Giants recovered and ran back for a touchdown; Anderson had been steamrolled and suffered a concussion when his protection broke down; punter Dave Zastudil had booted the ball into one of his blockers for a safety; and the Giants had returned the ensuing free kick for a touchdown. New York led 30–3 after barely a quarter of play.

Crennel fumed. Players shrugged. "It's the preseason," said Savage. "You never know what it means."

The next day Savage traded a seventh-round pick to the Dolphins for nickelback Travis Daniels, which was like sandbagging a flood. Imagine what Romo and Terrell Owens were thinking about the season opener as they watched Eli Manning strafe the Browns' secondary.

AUGUST 21

BEREA

WITH LINEBACKER Willie McGinest nursing a strained groin, the Browns promoted Hall to the first team for the time being. Later, as they do three or four times a week, Crennel and Mel Tucker met to dissect the defense position by position. "The guy who keeps showing up is Hall," Crennel said. "He can rush, and he keeps showing an ability to cover that I didn't expect from a kid who didn't have to do that in college."

"He's a football player," Tucker said. "The game's not too big for him."

"Give him more chances," Crennel said.

Both men wished they had such a solution for the secondary. "We need them to grow up," Crennel said of the defensive backs, with a hint of resignation in his voice. "I hope Monday's a wake-up call for Eric, because in this league they're going to keep coming at you."

AUGUST 24

BEREA

BACK AT CAMP the day after another embarrassing loss, this one in Detroit, Savage told Crennel that what happened in the preseason games shouldn't shake the solid foundation the coaches and staff had built. Eight starters (including Anderson, Edwards and Lewis) were among the 15 players who missed the Lions game because of injuries. And though Brady Quinn produced only six points in six sputtering possessions against the Lions, he most likely wouldn't be needed when the real games began; Anderson had assured the staff that the mild concussion he'd suffered against the Giants wouldn't prevent him from playing on Sept. 7.

"The Giants lose [Osi] Umenyiora for the year. [Tom] Brady and [Peyton] Manning haven't even played yet," Savage told Crennel, adding that the Patriots had looked awful in losing their first three preseason games. "Nobody knows anything right now. Let's just get through this week and get to the Dallas week healthy. The preseason's a mirage. We'll be fine."

Said Edwards, as he prepared to return to action after cutting his foot in a fluke practice accident two weeks earlier, "When I come back, I'll provide energy, swagger, playmaking. The preseason sucks. We all know that. We're preparing for Dallas, not these games."

MARK DUNCAN/AP

GET IT IN WRITING

Forget the preseason, says Edwards—Week 1 against Dallas will begin the true test of how the 2008 Browns measure up against massive expectations.

AUGUST 30

CLEVELAND

AFTER A fairly painless cutdown to the final roster, Savage scouted the Boston College–Kent State game at Browns Stadium. Putting down his binoculars for a moment, he considered whether his team was fortified enough to win its first division title since 1989.

"This is going to be a grinder of a season," he said. "Our schedule's tougher, and no team in our division will be able to win five, six games in a row. I felt so good about our team before camp that I knew we'd be fine, as long as we didn't get any of the injuries that can kill a team, and we didn't. Now it's the opening kickoff. I think we're ready."

Savage, his staff and his players believe the Browns are talented enough to win the AFC North, but they also realize they could crash and burn if Anderson is erratic, Rogers disappoints and the corners don't step up. That's the fascination of early September in the NFL and the reason why, from the dude on Public Square ("This is our year!") to the hounds in the Dawg Pound, all of Cleveland will be in full throat when the season starts on Sunday. □

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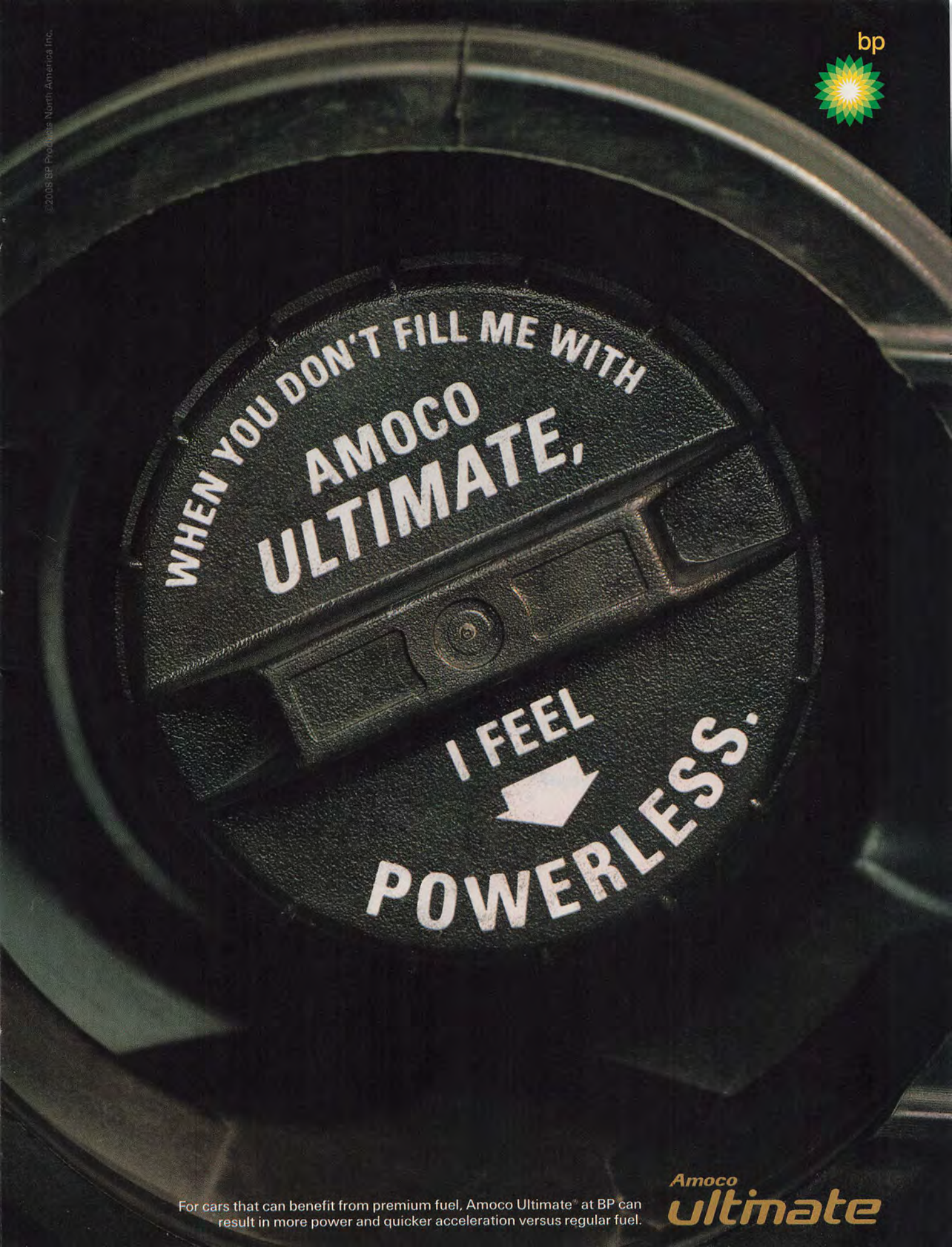

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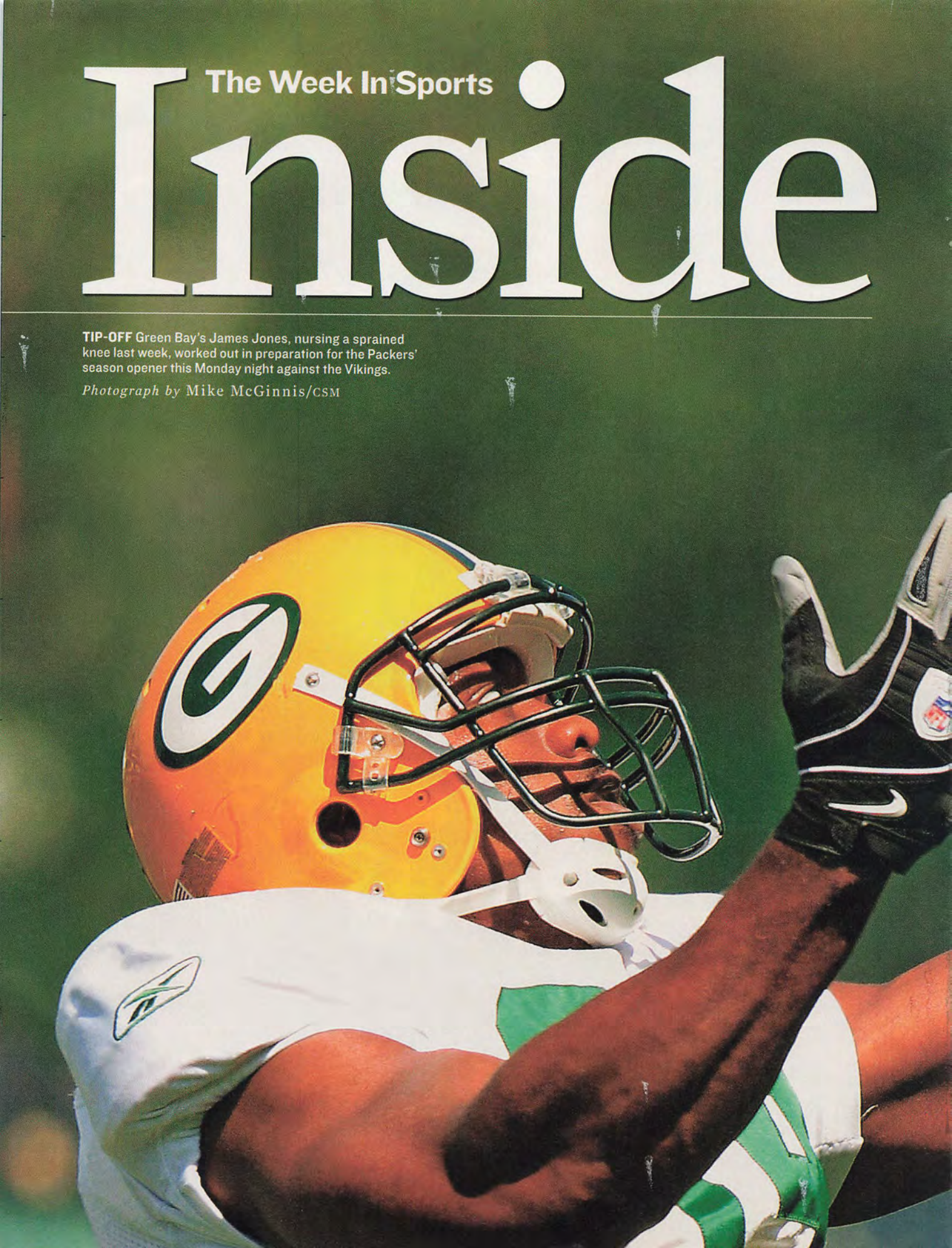
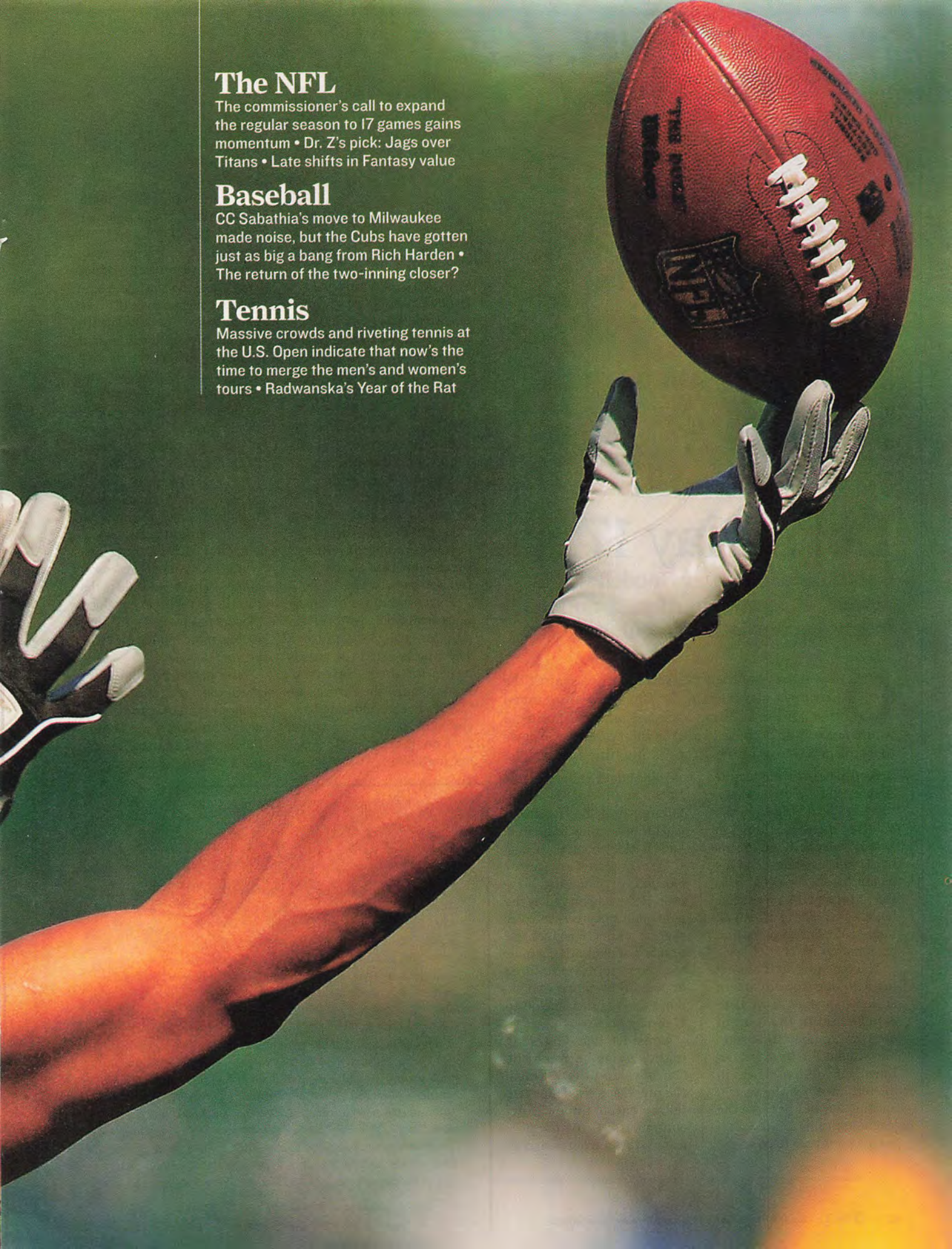
The Week In Sports

Inside



TIP-OFF Green Bay's James Jones, nursing a sprained knee last week, worked out in preparation for the Packers' season opener this Monday night against the Vikings.

Photograph by Mike McGinnis/CSM



The NFL

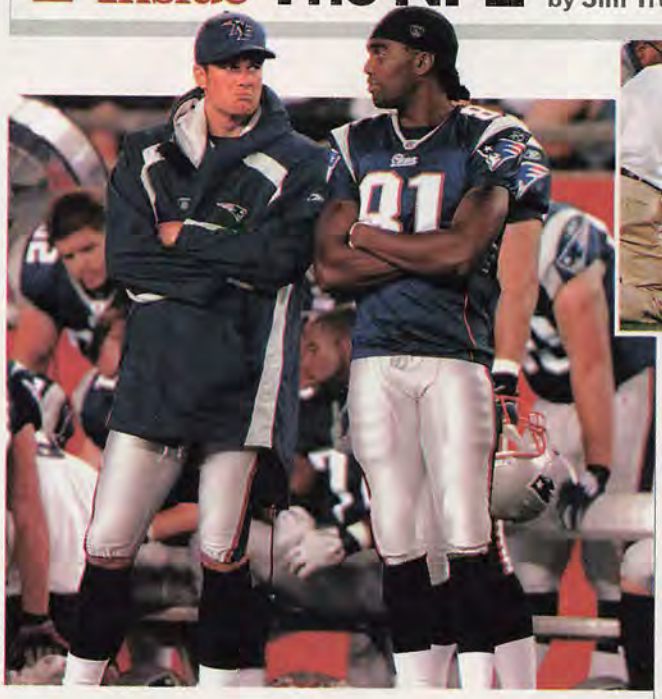
The commissioner's call to expand the regular season to 17 games gains momentum • Dr. Z's pick: Jags over Titans • Late shifts in Fantasy value

Baseball

CC Sabathia's move to Milwaukee made noise, but the Cubs have gotten just as big a bang from Rich Harden • The return of the two-inning closer?

Tennis

Massive crowds and riveting tennis at the U.S. Open indicate that now's the time to merge the men's and women's tours • Radwanska's Year of the Rat



PAIN, NO GAIN Brady and Randy Moss (81) mostly idled last week, avoiding a blow like Umenyiora's (above).

Let's Play 17

Commissioner Roger Goodell wants better NFL games in August, and that means expanding the regular season

ON THE eve of their preseason opener against the Cowboys last month, the Chargers announced that All-Pro running back LaDainian Tomlinson would not suit up because of a groin injury. That was news to Tomlinson—the injury, not his playing status. The defending two-time league rushing champion is accustomed to watching from the sideline during exhibition games, baseball cap on his head, sunflower seeds in his mouth, bored expression on his face. In eight NFL preseasons he has 14 rushing attempts, total—and none since the first exhibition game of 2005.

The coaching staff doesn't need to see Tomlinson in action, nor does it want to expose him to the kind of devastating injury that sidelined Giants Pro Bowl end Osi Umenyiora (torn meniscus in his left knee) for the season on Aug. 23. But because the league says only injured players are permitted to be on the sideline out of uniform, Tomlinson spent the preseason nursing that "bad groin," a condition he could only smile and chuckle about.

Commissioner Roger Goodell isn't laughing, however. He's so dismayed by the poor quality of preseason play that he wants to reduce the number of exhibition games from four per team to three or possibly even two, and expand the regular season to 17 or 18 games.

Consider last Thursday night's game between the Cowboys and the Vikings, the preseason finale for two teams rated Super Bowl contenders: Only one projected starter from each club played, linebacker E.J. Henderson for Minnesota and fullback Deon Anderson for Dallas. A similar script was followed throughout the league, though spectators paid the same price for these glorified scrimmages as they do for regular-season tickets; in most cases fans are required to purchase those preseason seats as part of a full season-ticket package.

More and more of those preseason tickets, even when paid for, are going unused. The Giants listed the attendance for their preseason finale against the Patriots as 76,798, but a blindfolded archer could have shot an arrow from midfield and not hit anyone in the stands. There were a few notable spectators on the sideline, though: Eli Manning and Tom Brady sat out the game.

Goodell's proposed modification of the schedule has prompted mixed reactions from players, coaches, executives and owners. Most coaches prefer the four-game preseason because it gives them more opportunity to evaluate young and marginal players (who get the bulk of the preseason playing time and an inordinate amount in the final exhibition game). Some owners and veteran players support an expanded regular season because an additional week or two of regular-season games would presumably increase network television rights fees. (Local stations, rather than networks, carry most preseason games.) That would add to the total gross revenues, of which players receive 60%. In other words, more money for owners *and* players.

Any proposed change in the number of regular-season games would have to provide a plan for paying the players for the extra games, including a way to adjust existing

Dr. Z's Pick of the Week

Last year's flukiest rivalry? Jacksonville-Tennessee. In Week 1 the Jags were big favorites at home. Tennessee won it straight up, 13–10, rushing for 282 yards. The Titans never had put up that many. The Jags never had given up that much. They met again in November in Tennessee. Both were hustling for wild-card berths, but Jags QB David Garrard was out with a sprained ankle. Time to tap the Titans, right? Jacksonville (*above*, Maurice Jones-Drew) won in a breeze, 28–13, stopping Tennessee's runners cold.

Now I'll tell you why I like the visiting **Jaguars** this Sunday: their pass rush. They sacked Vince Young four times in their win last year and added edge rushers Derrick Harvey and Quentin Groves in the draft. This will be a Jacksonville season dedicated to chasing enemy QBs. The Jags will give Young a rough afternoon. I also see them getting 400 yards of offense. Next time around, in Jacksonville, it could be completely different, of course. It's that kind of rivalry. —*Paul Zimmerman*

DR. Z picks the entire slate of games each Thursday at **SI.com/nfl.**

DAVID BERGMAN (BRADY AND MOSS); TWIG/CAL SPORT MEDIA (UMENYIORA); DILIP VISHWANAT/GETTY IMAGES

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contracts. Currently, players are paid $1,225 per week in the preseason, then receive 17 weekly paychecks during the regular season. "If you work at The Gap and they add two more hours to your schedule, you would expect to get two more hours' worth of pay," says Broncos cornerback Domonque Foxworth, who is on the 10-member executive committee of the NFL Players Association.

Another concern of the players is wear and tear. "Are guys going to have to sit out games like in baseball?" Chargers center and player rep Nick Hardwick wonders. "It's already a long season. An 18-game regular season? Wow. I think you'd have to sit a guy down for a week and let him rest, because that is incredibly long, even with the bye week."

Before Goodell can make a change—he hopes to do so in time for the 2010 season, though that appears ambitious—the 32 owners would have to agree (the support appears to be there), and the NFLPA would have to sign off. The commissioner said that an expanded regular season will be tied to negotiations with the NFLPA for a new collective bargaining agreement (the current CBA expires after the 2009 season) and to talks with the networks (contracts run through at least 2011).

A union official said recently that its membership is not against expanding the season but wants to see how the players would benefit. Goodell points to two potential advantages for the players that would be up for discussion: a reduced off-season workload and an increase in roster size.

For the fans? More stars such as Tomlinson wearing helmets instead of caps on game days in August. □

Inside Fantasy Football

Pre-Snap Adjustments

They haven't even played an official game, but some player values have already shifted radically by David Sabino

Who says nothing important happens in preseason? As we prepare for football games that actually count (remember those?), here are the players whose fantasy values have risen—or fallen—the most.

DARREN SPROLES
Chargers, RB

The slippery 5' 6" return specialist *(above, left)* had a great preseason, averaging 5.6 yards per carry (is there such a thing as rushing your height?) to win the job as backup to LaDainian Tomlinson. The fourth-year back has already shown he can produce on offense: With four TDs in '07, he tied Chris Chambers for third on the team behind LT and Antonio Gates.

CHRIS PERRY
Bengals, RB

The bad news for Rudi Johnson, who was cut by Cincinnati last Saturday, spelled rejuvenation for Chris Perry. Injuries have limited Perry, a first-round pick out of Michigan in 2004, to 73 carries over three seasons, but he will be the Bengals' starter this Sunday against the Ravens.

ANTHONY FASANO
Dolphins, TE

The third-year pro was already in position to improve his production this year simply because he was out of the shadow of Jason Witten, having gone from Dallas to Miami this offseason with Tony Sparano, the Dolphins' new coach. Fasano's prospects improved even more when the Dolphins signed Chad Pennington, a quarterback with a history of getting the ball to his tight ends, especially near the goal line.

MATT RYAN
Falcons, QB

The third overall pick from Boston College had a solid enough preseason to grab hold of the starting job; while ups and downs are inevitable, he should have at least a few big games while throwing to the tandem of Roddy White and Michael Jenkins. Ryan merits a Week 3 start against the woeful Chiefs in the Georgia Dome.

JERRICHO COTCHERY
Jets, WR

The addition of Brett Favre affects nobody's fantasy value more than that of New York's top receiver from '07, who rises from a solid second or third fantasy option to a clear No. 1. Favre has said that he and Cotchery clicked from their first throw; a fantasy breakout year similar to that of Green Bay's Greg Jennings in '07 (12 TDs) could be upcoming for the fifth-year player .

KEVIN CURTIS
Eagles, WR

No timetable has been set for the return of Donovan McNabb's most reliable wideout following sports-hernia surgery on Aug. 21. And even when Curtis *(above, right)* does come back, his is the sort of injury that tends to linger, so it's unlikely he'll put up the kind of numbers he did in '07.

MATT LEINART
Cardinals, QB

With Anquan Boldin and Larry Fitzgerald to throw to, Leinart would have been worth drafting—had he won the starting job that was his to lose. A preseason in which he didn't toss more interceptions (4) than touchdowns (2) would have helped.

JOHN SOMMERS II/ICON SMI (SPROLES); TIM SHAFFER/REUTERS (CURTIS)

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5	Short Handed Hold'em	**Sep. 19 – 25**	Sep. 28 at 4:00Pm ET
6	Pot Limit Texas Hold'em	**Sep. 26 – Oct. 2**	Oct. 5 at 4:00PM ET
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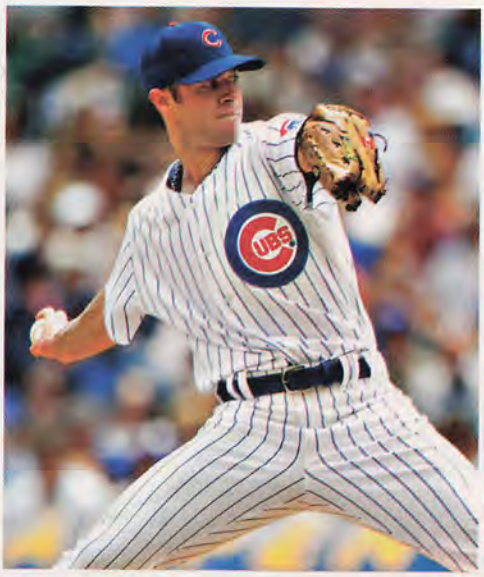

THE FRUGAL RICH Harden (far left) has been even more unhittable than Sabathia.

Trumped Ace?

The Brewers have every reason to be ecstatic with CC Sabathia, but the Cubs' Rich Harden has been just as dominant

AN NL CENTRAL team pulls off a major deal well before the trade deadline, adding one of the best pitchers in the American League to its rotation and bolstering its run to the postseason. That pitcher goes on to dominate hitters, with an ERA under 2.00, and builds a case for Cy Young consideration in half a season of work. CC who?

The pitcher is Cubs righthander Rich Harden, who has matched the Brewers' CC Sabathia start for start, if not inning for inning, since being acquired (with much less fanfare than Sabathia) on July 8 from the A's for a package of low-ceiling prospects. Harden, available in no small part because of his unreliability (he appeared in 16 games and threw 72⅓ innings in 2006 and '07 combined), has stayed healthy and buried the NL in a hail of 95-mph-plus fastballs and darting splitters. In nine starts for Chicago through Sunday, Harden was 4–1 with a 1.50 ERA, 75 strikeouts in 54 innings and a .163 batting average against. The Cubs won seven of those games and were 29–15 overall since Harden's first appearance on July 12.

It's not surprising that Harden, who was 5–1 with a 2.34 ERA for Oakland before the trade, has been effective. It is surprising that he's taken a regular turn in the rotation for this long. Harden, only 26, suffered an assortment of ailments from 2005 through '07 that kept him on the DL more than on the mound. Last winter he tinkered with his mechanics—he had been opening up too soon and dropping his back side, which put considerable strain on his throwing shoulder—and since returning from a sore lat muscle on May 11 has not missed a start. This season marks just the second time in Harden's six-year career that he's made more than 19 starts or thrown more than 130 innings.

When a player splits his season between two leagues, his value tends to be overlooked because his season stats are reset to a line of zeroes after the switch. In Harden's case that practice hides the fact that at week's end he was leading the majors with an overall ERA of 1.99, nearly half a run better than those of the AL and NL leaders, Cliff Lee of the Indians and Tim Lincecum of the Giants, respectively. He led all starters in strikeout rate with 11.5 per nine innings, and his 6.05 hits allowed per nine innings was far below Sabathia's 7.96.

However, whereas Sabathia has averaged nearly eight innings and more than 110 pitches per start as a Brewer, including six complete games, Harden has averaged only six innings and 99 pitches per outing. But then the Cubs don't see Harden in the same light as the Brewers view Sabathia—as a three-month rental who'll be a free agent at season's end. Harden came with a club option for 2009 at the bargain price of $7 million, which Chicago will surely exercise.

The deep and talented Cubs bullpen (SI, Aug. 25) allows manager Lou Piniella to handle Harden, who has a tendency to throw a lot of pitches even when he's throwing well, conservatively. By doing so, Chicago has gotten strong work from Harden and improved his chances of keeping healthy for what looks like a deep run into October. □

Baseball Prospectus
Unconventional Wisdom

In 1988 the A's helped usher in the era of the three-out closer when manager **Tony La Russa** started using **Dennis Eckersley** for one inning or less, and 29 of the righthander's 45 saves came in that situation. Twenty years later A's skipper **Bob Geren** may be ushering out the era with his use of rookie **Brad Ziegler**. The sidearming Ziegler, 28, had six saves in his first six chances—three of which came in two-inning stints. Over the last five seasons only nine relievers have had three two-inning saves in a season compared with 42 pitchers in '88 alone. Ziegler appeared comfortable in his new role: 9⅔ innings, an 0.93 ERA in his six saves. If Ziegler maintains his effectiveness, other managers might follow Geren's lead and finally alter how they use closers so their teams get more innings from their best relievers. —J.S.

TANNEN MAURY/EPA (HARDEN); SCOTT BOEHM/GETTY IMAGES (SABATHIA); BEN MARGOT/AP (ZIEGLER)

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MIXED MASTERS From left, Jankovic, Federer, Williams and Roddick escaped a rash of early-round Open upsets.

Gender Blender

As equal-opportunity events like the U.S. Open show, a merger would benefit both the men's and women's tours

IT IS THE rare New York Knicks fan who is equally passionate about the WNBA's New York Liberty. Plenty of PGA Tour followers could scarcely care less about the LPGA. And, for that matter, vice versa. Yet the overwhelming majority of tennis fans draw little distinction between the men's and women's tours. Is any devotee of, say, Venus Williams unfamiliar with Rafael Nadal? Does any supporter of Andy Roddick not have an opinion about Maria Sharapova?

This gender equity is one of tennis's great assets, and it was on ample display at last week's U.S. Open in New York City. Ana Ivanovic of Serbia—the top seed in the women's draw and current WTA It Girl—was knocked out in a second-round loss to a French qualifier, Julie Coin. Crowd-pleasing ninth seed James Blake and fourth-seeded David Ferrer were eliminated on the men's side. But the tournament was still on course to shatter attendance records, despite the loss of stars like Ivanovic and a soft economy. The Nadal–Roger Federer rivalry has fans riveted on the men's action, while five women still have a chance to finish the tournament ranked No. 1 in the world. "It's the old tennis saying," Martina Navratilova says. "One plus one equals three."

After years of ignoring this reality the tours are finally getting hip to the math. The ATP and WTA have retreated from their turf wars recently, and they've begun sharing everything from website technology to office space in London. More important, by 2012, six of the nine largest tournaments besides the Grand Slams will become "mixed events," featuring men's and women's fields competing simultaneously. (Currently just two, Miami and Indian Wells, Calif., do so.) Now it's time for the next logical step: merging the tours into a single entity.

Apart from streamlining the bureaucracy and benefiting from economies of scale—eliminating some letters from tennis's notorious alphabet soup, so to speak—a joint tour would be even more attractive to corporate and television partners. And the timing could be perfect. The ATP is looking for new management anyway. It recently announced that embattled executive president and chairman Etienne de Villiers, who came under fire from the players for his aggressive management style, will leave his post at the end of 2008. On the women's side, the WTA is thriving financially, and it has an obvious candidate to head an amalgamated tour: Larry Scott, the WTA's CEO since 2004, who was formerly the No. 2 at the ATP. "Both men's tennis and women's tennis are appealing on their own," says Scott, "but they're much more appealing when they come together."

Tennis being tennis, change might not come easily. Asked about the possibility of a single tour, Ivan Ljubicic, the tour veteran from Croatia who's heavily involved in ATP politics, shrugged. "Maybe," he said, "but there couldn't be equal prize money." When the same question was put to Jelena Jankovic, the Serbian star who's ranked No. 2 in the WTA, she responded, "Maybe, but there would have to be equal prize money." Still, a dual-gendered megatour makes a lot of sense. Maybe the players just need a refresher course in tennis math. □

Radwanska's Rat Race

Since **Agnieszka Radwanska**'s improbable run to the fourth round of last year's U.S. Open—a smashing Grand Slam debut during which the then 18-year-old's euphoria over her third-round upset of **Maria Sharapova** was briefly tempered by her concern for Flippy and Floppy, the pet rats she had to leave behind in her native Poland—she has continued to defy expectations. So far in 2008, just her third season on the WTA tour, she has won three tournaments, earned $842,142 in prize money and climbed as high as No. 9 in the rankings. Her loss to **Venus Williams** on Monday means that Radwanska *(above)* has lasted until the fourth round or later at every slam this year. But her success has come at a price. "I had to give away the rats," she says. "I'm away too much to take care of them." —*Andrew Lawrence*

MANNY MILLAN (JANKOVIC AND FEDERER); CHUCK SOLOMON (WILLIAMS); DAVID SAFFRAN/ICON SMI (RODDICK); JASON SZENES/EPA (RADWANSKA)

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Please Don't Ruin My Fantasy

by Chris Ballard

I'VE GOT this one friend who's impossible to get ahold of. Unless, that is, I send him a fantasy trade proposal, in which case he responds pretty much instantaneously. Sometimes I go so far as to embed personal messages. *Tom Brady for Steven Jackson . . . When's your wife due?* Last week was different, though. Last week I heard from him nine times. Naturally, our league drafted on Monday.

Yes, fantasy football season is back, that time of year when rational men act in irrational ways. According to a doctor friend, during the night shift at a Bay Area hospital last weekend, both on-duty ER docs were huddled around a computer, poring over draft rankings for an hour. *Appendicitis? Surely it can wait until the fourth round.* Then there's my neighbor, who has two kids and works at a high school. He prepared for his first day of work by—what else?—flying to Vegas for a weekendlong draft. He returned on Sunday night, exhausted but rapturous. Eyes bleary, voice like charcoal, he uttered two triumphant words: Adrian Peterson.

Once, we might have explained away such behavior as that of the fringe obsessive. Now, I'm not so sure. I'm starting to think it's more socially acceptable to play fantasy sports than not to. Nearly 20 million Americans do it; even real athletes play. When I spoke with Rockies outfielder Matt Holliday last week, he was far more interested in discussing his fantasy team than the NL West race (and considering the NL West this year, I don't blame him). As it turns out, Matt and I made the same first-round pick this season, so allow me to speak for both of us when I say, Marion Barber, we're counting on you, buddy!

The Women Against Fantasy Sports website features a message board for members to post horror stories and sells apparel with up-the-revolution mottoes.

This addiction does not pay for itself. According to an August report from a Chicago research group, fantasy football will cost U.S. employers an estimated $9.2 billion in lost work time this season. That's more than the city budget of San Francisco, more than the GNP of Jamaica. Hell, you could buy nine NFL franchises for that money. And that's not even factoring in other fantasy sports or the amount of leisure time consumed by draft recon and tense score monitoring. How tense? A University of Mississippi study found that nearly half of fantasy players rarely or never drink while watching games because they take a "more business-like approach." *Thanks, Bill, but no tall boys for me today. Can't you see I'm working here?*

Who will stop the fantasy madness, you ask? The WAFS, that's who. No, not the Wisconsin Alliance for Fire Safety, though I hear it does fine work, but rather Women Against Fantasy Sports, a group started by Allison Lodish, a 35-year-old self-proclaimed fantasy widow whose husband recently joined his 10th fantasy football league. The WAFS website features a message board for members to post horror stories, like the tale of the newlywed whose betrothed spent the inaugural evening of their honeymoon managing his squad. The site also sells apparel with up-the-revolution mottoes such as CLOSED FOR THE FANTASY SEASON (on, uh, panties) and I THOUGHT I WAS YOUR FANTASY. Ouch. How are we men supposed to respond? By starting DORKs (Dudes Obsessed with Ranking Kickers)?

Perhaps the two sides just need to talk it out. So I called Lodish and arranged to meet at a coffee shop near her home in Kentfield, Calif. At first glance she looked friendly—curly blonde hair, big smile—but then so do black bears before they tear your scalp off. She explained the site's origin, saying, "Nobody's ever really come out publicly and said, You guys are a bunch of lame-asses for getting emotionally involved in this stuff." I countered that just last week a stay-at-home dad won $1 million in a fantasy fishing contest (33-year-old Michael Thompson, livin' the dream!). In return, she offered some advice, "Chris, the first step to recovery is admitting you have a problem." She said something else too, but I didn't catch it, because I was too busy checking the Red Sox–Yankees box score on my cellphone. After all, there are only three weeks left in the fantasy baseball season.

When I got home, my wife wanted to know if I had "learned" anything. I thought for a second. Sure, Lodish had a decent argument. And, true, even a pro jock—Giants outfielder Randy Winn, who plays in four fantasy football leagues—said, when I told him about WAFS, "They do have a point." And, yeah, I probably could be more productive with my time.

So I turned to my wife, figuring I should be honest, and singled out the most important thing I'd learned during the talk with Lodish.

"Well," I said, "Jason Giambi was 2 for 2 with a homer. . . ." □

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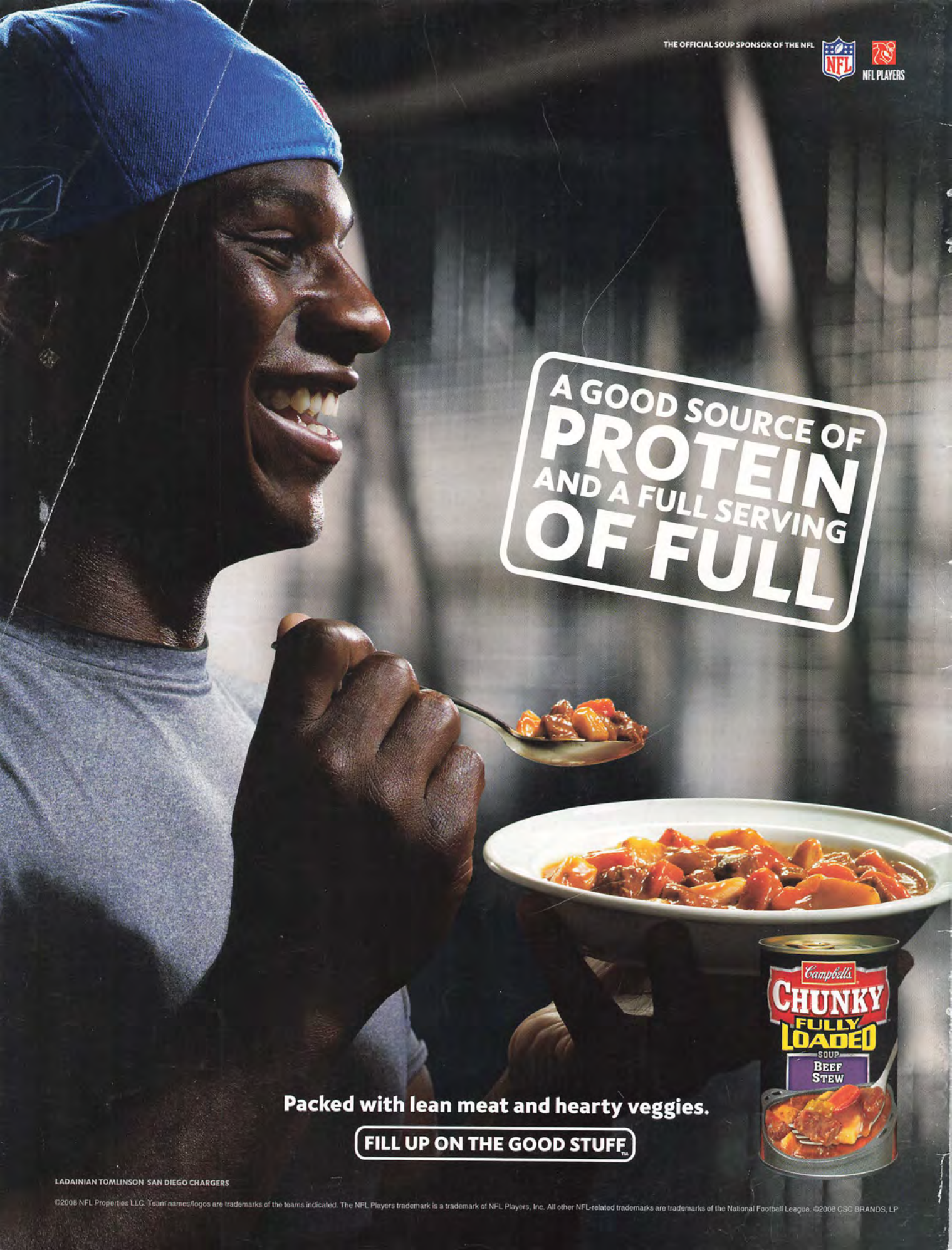

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